

THE GUNSLINGER

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TO  
ED FERMAN

who took a chance on these stories, one by one.

THE GUNSLINGER

The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed.

The desert was the apotheosis of all deserts, huge, standing to the sky for what might have been parsecs in all directions. White; blinding; waterless; without feature save for the faint, cloudy haze of the mountains which sketched themselves on the horizon and the devil-grass which brought sweet dreams, nightmares, death. An occasional tombstone sign pointed the way, for once the drifted track that cut its way through the thick crust of alkali had been a highway and coaches had followed it. The world had moved on since then. The world had emptied. The gunslinger walked stolidly, not hurrying, not loafing. A hide waterbag was slung around his middle like a bloated sausage. It was almost full. He had progressed through the khaf over many years, and had reached the fifth level. At the seventh or eighth, he would not have been thirsty; he could have watched own body dehydrate with clinical, detached attention, watering its crevices and dark inner hollows only when his logic told him it must be done. He was not seventh or eighth. He was fifth. So he was thirsty, although he had no particular urge to drink. In a vague way, all this pleased him. It was romantic.

Below the waterbag were his guns, finely weighted to his hand. The two belts crisscrossed above his crotch. The holsters were oiled too deeply for even this Philistine sun to crack. The stocks of the guns were sandalwood, yellow and finely grained. The holsters were tied down with raw hide cord, and they swung heavily against his hips. The brass casings of the cartridges looped into the gun belts twinkled and flashed and heliographed in the sun. The leather made subtle creaking noises. The guns themselves made no noise. They had spilled blood. There was no need to make noise in the sterility of the desert.

His clothes were the no-color of rain or dust. His shirt was open at the throat, with a rawhide thong dangling loosely in hand-punched eyelets. His pants were seam-stretched dungarees. He breasted a gently rising dune (although there was no sand here; the desert was hardpan, and even the harsh winds that blew when dark came raised only an aggravating harsh dust like scouring powder) and saw the kicked remains of a tiny campfire on the lee side, the side which the sun would quit earliest. Small signs like this, once more affirming the man in black's essential humanity, never failed to please him. His lips stretched in the pitted, flaked remains of his face. He squatted.

He had burned the devil-grass, of course. It was the only thing out here that would burn. It burned with a greasy, flat light, and it burned slow. Border dwellers had told him that devils lived even in the flames. They burned it but would not look into the light. They said the devils hypnotized, beckoned, would eventually draw the one who looked into the fires. And the next man foolish enough to look into the fire might see you.

The burned grass was crisscrossed in the now-familiar ideographic pattern, and crumbled to gray senselessness before the gunslinger's prodding hand. There was nothing in the remains but a charred scrap of bacon, which he ate thoughtfully. It had always been this way. The gunslinger had followed the man in black across the desert for two months now, across the endless, screamingly monotonous purgatorial wastes, and had yet to find spoor other than the hygienic sterile ideographs of the man in black's camp fires. He had not found a can, a bottle, or a waterbag (the gunslinger had left four of those behind, like dead snake-skins).

— Perhaps the campfires are a message, spelled out letter by letter. Take a powder. Or, the end draweth nigh. Or maybe even, Eat at Joe's. It didn't matter. He had no understanding of the ideograms, if they were ideograms. And the remains were as cold as all the others. He knew he was closer, but did not know how he knew. That didn't matter either. He stood up, brushing his hands. No other trace; the wind, razor-sharp, had of course filed away even what scant tracks the hardpan held. He had never even been able to find his quarry's droppings. Nothing. Only these cold campfires along the ancient highway and the relentless range-finder in his own head. He sat down and allowed himself a short pull from the waterbag. He scanned the desert, looked up at the sun, which was now sliding down the far quadrant of the sky. He got up, removed his gloves from his belt, and began to pull devil-grass for his own fire, which he laid over the ashes the man in black had left. He found the irony, like the romance of his thirst, bitterly appealing. He did not use the flint and steel until the remains of the day were only the fugitive heat in the ground beneath him and a sardonic orange line on the monochrome western horizon. He watched the south patiently, toward the mountains, not hoping or expecting to see the thin straight line of smoke from a new campfire, but merely watching because that was a part of it. There was nothing. He was close, but only relatively so. Not close enough to see smoke at dusk. He struck his spark to the dry, shredded grass and lay down upwind, letting the dreamsmoke blow out toward the waste. The wind, except for occasional gyrating dust devils, was constant. Above, the stars were unwinking, also constant. Suns and worlds by the million. Dizzying constellations, cold fire in every primary hue. As he watched, the sky washed from violet to ebony. A meteor etched a brief, spectacular arc and winked out. The fire threw strange shadows as the devil-grass burned its slow way down into new patterns —not ideograms but a straightforward crisscross vaguely frightening in its own no-nonsense surety. He had laid his fuel in a pattern that was not artful but only workable. It spoke of blacks and whites. It spoke of a man who might straighten bad pictures in strange hotel rooms. The fire burned its steady, slow flame, and phantoms danced in its incandescent core. The gunslinger did not see. He slept. The two patterns, art and craft, were welded together. The wind moaned. Every now and then a perverse downdraft would make the smoke whirl and eddy toward him, and sporadic whiffs of the smoke touched him. They built dreams in the same way that a small irritant may build a pearl in an oyster. Occasionally the gunslinger moaned with the wind. The stars were as indifferent to this as they were to wars, crucifixions, resurrections. This also would have pleased him.

## II

He had come down off the last of the foothills leading the donkey, whose eyes were already dead and bulging with the heat. He had passed the last town three weeks before, and since then there had only been the deserted coach track and an occasional huddle of border dwellers' sod dwellings. The huddles had degenerated into single dwellings, most inhabited by lepers or madmen. He found the madmen better company. One had given him a stainless steel Silva compass and bade him give it to Jesus. The gun slinger took it gravely. If he saw Him, he would turn over the compass. He did not expect to. Five days had passed since the last hut, and he had begun to suspect there would be no more when he topped the last eroded hill and saw the familiar low-backed sod roof. The dweller, a surprisingly young man with a wild shock of strawberry hair that reached almost to his waist, was weeding a scrawny stand of corn with zealous abandon. The mule let out a wheezing grunt and the dweller looked up, glaring blue eyes coming target-center on the gunslinger in a moment. He raised both hands in curt salute and then bent to the corn again, humping up the row next to his hut with back bent, tossing devil-grass and an occasional stunted corn plant over his shoulder. His hair flopped and flew in the wind that now came directly from the desert, with nothing to break it. The gunslinger came down the hill slowly, leading the donkey on which his waterskins slogged. He paused by the edge of the lifeless-looking cornpatch, drew a drink from one of his skins to start the saliva, and spat into the arid soil. "Life for your crop." "Life for your own," the dweller answered and stood up. His back popped audibly. He surveyed the gunslinger without fear. The little of his face visible between beard and hair seemed unmarked by the rot, and his eyes, while a bit wild, seemed sane. "I don't have anything but corn and beans," he said. "Corn's free, but you'll have to kick something in for the beans. A man brings them out once in a while. He don't stay long." The dweller laughed shortly.

"Afraid of spirits."

"I expect he thinks you're one."

"I expect he does."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment. The dweller put out his hand. "Brown is my name." The gunslinger shook his hand. As he did so, a scrawny raven croaked from the low peak of the sod roof. The dweller gestured at it briefly:

"That's Zoltan."

At the sound of its name the raven croaked again and flew across to Brown. It landed on the dweller's head and roosted, talons firmly twined in the wild thatch of hair.

"Screw you," Zoltan croaked brightly. "Screw you and the horse you rode in on."

The gunslinger nodded amiably.

"Beans, beans, the musical fruit," the raven recited, inspired. "The more you eat, the more you toot"

"You teach him that?"

"That's all he wants to learn, I guess," Brown said. "Tried to teach him The Lord's Prayer once." His eyes traveled out beyond the hut for a moment, toward the gritty, featureless hardpan. "Guess this ain't Lord's Prayer country. You're a gunslinger. That right?"

"Yes." He hunkered down and brought out his makings. Zoltan launched himself from Brown's head and landed, flittering, on the gunslinger's shoulder.

"After the other one, I guess."

"Yes." The inevitable question formed in his mouth:

"How long since he passed by?"

Brown shrugged. "I don't know. Time's funny out here. More than two weeks. Less than two months. The bean man's been twice since he passed. I'd guess six weeks. That's probably wrong."

"The more you eat, the more you toot," Zoltan said.

"Did he stop off?" the gunslinger asked.

Brown nodded. "He stayed supper, same as you will, I guess. We passed the time."

The gunslinger stood up and the bird flew back to the roof, squawking. He felt an odd, trembling eagerness. "What did he talk about?"

Brown cocked an eyebrow at him. "Not much. Did it ever rain and when did I come here and had I buried my wife. I did most of the talking, which ain't usual." He paused. and the only sound was the stark wind. "He's a sorcerer, ain't he?"

"Yes."

Brown nodded slowly. "I knew. Are you?"

"I'm just a man."

"You'll never catch him."

"I'll catch him."

They looked at each other, a sudden depth of feeling between them, the dweller upon his dust-puff-dry ground, the gunslinger on the hardpan that shelved down to the desert. He reached for his flint.

"Here." Brown produced a sulfur-headed match and struck it with a grimed nail. The gunslinger pushed the tip of his smoke into the flame and drew.

"Thanks."

"You'll want to fill your skins," the dweller said, turning away. "Spring's under the eaves in back. I'll start dinner."

The gunslinger stepped gingerly over the rows of corn and went around back. The spring was at the bottom of a hand-dug well, lined with stones to keep the powdery earth from caving. As he descended the rickety ladder, the gunslinger reflected that the stones must represent two years' work easily - hauling, dragging, laying. The water was clear but slow-moving, and filling the skins was a long chore.

While he was topping the second, Zoltan perched on the lip of the well.

"Screw you and the horse you rode in on," he advised.

He looked up, startled. The shaft was about fifteen feet deep: easy enough for Brown to drop a rock on him, break his head, and steal everything on him. A crazy or a rotter wouldn't do it; Brown was neither. Yet he liked Brown, and so he pushed the thought out of his mind and got the rest of his water. What came, came.

When he came through the hut's door and walked down the steps (the hovel proper was set below ground level, designed to catch and hold the coolness of the nights), Brown was poking ears of corn into the embers of a tiny fire with a hardwood spatula. Two ragged plates had been set at opposite ends of a dun blanket. Water for the beans was just beginning to bubble in a pot hung over the fire.

"I'll pay for the water, too."

Brown did not look up. "The water's a gift from God. Pappa Doc brings the beans."

The gunslinger grunted a laugh and sat down with his back against one rude wall, folded his arms and closed his eyes. After a little, the smell of roasting corn came to his nose. There was a pebbly rattle as Brown dumped a paper of dry beans into the pot. An occasional tak-tak-tak as Zoltan walked restlessly on the roof. He was tired; he had been going sixteen and sometimes eighteen hours a day between here and the horror that had occurred in Tull, the last vil lage. And he had been afoot for the last twelve days; the mule was at the end of its endurance.

Tak-tak-tak.

Two weeks, Brown had said, or as much as six. Didn't matter. There had been calendars in Tull, and they had remembered the man in black because of the old man he had healed on his way through. Just an old man dying with

the weed. An old man of thirty-five. And if Brown was right, the man in black had lost ground since then. But the desert was next. And the desert would be hell.

Tak-tak-tak.

— Lend me your wings, bird. I'll spread them and fly on the thermals.

He slept

### III

Brown woke him up five hours later. It was dark. The only light was the dull cherry glare of the banked embers.

"Your mule has passed on," Brown said. "Dinner's ready."

"How?"

Brown shrugged. "Roasted and boiled, how else? You picky?"

"No, the mule."

"It just laid over, that's all. It looked like an old mule." And with a touch of apology: "Zoltan et the eyes."

"Oh." He might have expected it. "All right"

Brown surprised him again when they sat down to the blanket that served as a table by asking a brief blessing: Rain, health, expansion to the spirit

"Do you believe in an afterlife?" The gunslinger asked him as Brown dropped three ears of hot corn onto his plate.

Brown nodded. "I think this is it."

### IV

The beans were like bullets, the corn tough. Outside, the prevailing wind snuffled and whined around the ground-level eaves. He ate quickly, ravenously, drinking four cups of water with the meal. Halfway through, there

was a machine-gun rapping at the door. Brown got up and let Zoltan in. The bird flew across the room and hunched moodily in the corner.

"Musical fruit," he muttered.

After dinner, the gunslinger offered his tobacco.

— Now. Now the questions will come.

But Brown asked no questions. He smoked and looked at the dying embers of the fire. It was already noticeably cooler in the hovel.

"Lead us not into temptation," Zoltan said suddenly, apocalyptically.

The gunslinger started as if he had been shot at. He was suddenly sure that it was an illusion, all of it (not a dream, no; an enchantment), that the man in black had spun a spell and was trying to tell him something in a maddeningly obtuse, symbolic way.

"Have you been through Tull?" he asked suddenly.

Brown nodded. "Coming here, and once to sell corn. It rained that year. Lasted maybe fifteen minutes. The ground just seemed to open and suck it up. An hour later it was just as white and dry as ever. But the corn — God, the corn. You could see it grow. That wasn't so bad. But you could hear it, as if the rain had given it a mouth. It wasn't a happy sound. It seemed to be sighing and groaning its way out of the earth." He paused. "I had extra, so I took it and sold it. Pappa Doc said he'd do it, but he would have cheated me. So I went."

"You don't like town?"

"No."

"I almost got killed there," the gunslinger said abruptly.



"That so?"

"I killed a man that was touched by God," the gunslinger said. "Only it wasn't God. It was the man in black."

"He laid you a trap."

"Yes."

The looked at each other across the shadows, the moment taking on overtones of finality.

— Now the questions will come.

But Brown had nothing to say. His smoke was a smoldering roach, but when the gunslinger tapped his poke, Brown shook his head.

Zoltan shifted restlessly, seemed about to speak, subsided.

"May I tell you about it?" the gunslinger asked.

"Sure."

The gunslinger searched for words to begin and found none. "I have to flow," he said.

Brown nodded. "The water does that. The corn, please?"

"Sure."

He went up the stairs and out into the dark. The stars glittered overhead in a mad splash. The wind pulsed steadily. His urine arched out over the powdery cornfield in a wavering stream. The man in black had sent him here. Brown might even be the man in black himself. It might be —He shut the thoughts away. The only contingency he

had not learned how to bear was the possibility of his own madness. He went back inside.

"Have you decided if I'm an enchantment yet?" Brown asked, amused.

The gunslinger paused on the tiny landing, startled. Then he came down slowly and sat

"I started to tell you about Tull."

"Is it growing?"

"It's dead," the gunslinger said, and the words hung in the air.

Brown nodded. "The desert. I think it may strangle

everything eventually. Did you know that there was once a coach road across the desert?"

The gunslinger closed his eyes. His mind whirled crazily.

"You doped me," he said thickly.

"No. I've done nothing."

The gunslinger opened his eyes warily.

"You won't feel right about it unless I invite you," Brown said. "And so I do. Will you tell me about Tull?"

The gunslinger opened his mouth hesitantly and was surprised to find that this time the words were there. He began to speak in flat bursts that slowly spread into an even, slightly toneless narrative. The doped feeling left him, and he found himself oddly excited. He talked deep into the night. Brown did not interrupt at all. Neither did the bird.

V

He had bought the mule in Pricetown, and when he reached Tull, it was still fresh. The sun had set an hour earlier, but the gunslinger had continued traveling, guided by the town glow in the sky, then by the uncannily clear notes of a honky-tonk piano playing Hey Jude. The road widened as it took on tributaries.

The forests had been gone long now, replaced by the monotonous flat country: endless, desolate fields gone to timothy and low shrubs, shacks, eerie, deserted estates guarded by brooding, shadowed mansions where demons undeniably walked; leering, empty shanties where the people had either moved on or had been moved along, an occasional dweller's hovel, given away by a single flickering point of light in the dark, or by sullen, inbred clans toiling silently in the fields by day. Corn was the main crop, but there were beans and also some peas. An occasional scrawny cow stared at him lumpishly from between peeled alder poles. Coaches had passed him four times, twice coming and twice going, nearly empty as they came up on him from behind and bypassed him and his mule, fuller as they headed back toward the forests of the north.

It was ugly country. It had showered twice since he had left Pricetown, grudgingly both times.

Even the timothy looked yellow and dispirited. Ugly country. He had seen no sign of the man in black. Perhaps he had taken a coach.

The road made a bend, and beyond it the gunslinger clucked the mule to a stop and looked down at Tull. It was at the floor of a circular, bowl-shaped hollow, a shoddy jewel in a cheap setting. There were a number of lights, most of them clustered around the area of the music. There looked to be four streets, three running at right angles to the coach road, which was the main avenue of the town. Perhaps there would be a restaurant. He doubted it, but perhaps. He clucked at the mule.

More houses sporadically lined the road now, most of them still deserted. He passed a tiny graveyard with moldy, leaning wooden slabs overgrown and choked by the rank devil-grass. Perhaps five hundred feet further on he passed a chewed sign which said: TULL

The paint was flaked almost to the point of illegibility. There was another further on, but the gunslinger was not able to read that one at all.

A fool's chorus of half-stoned voices was rising in the final protracted lyric of Hey Jude - "Naa-naa-naa naa-na na-na... hey, Jude..." - as he entered the town proper. It was a dead sound, like the wind in the hollow of a rotted tree. Only the prosaic thump and pound of the honky-tonk piano saved him from seriously wondering if the man in black might not have raised ghosts to inhabit a deserted town. He smiled a little at the thought.

There were a few people on the streets, not many, but a few. Three ladies wearing black slacks and identical middy blouses passed by on the opposite boardwalk, not looking at him with pointed curiosity. Their faces seemed to swim above their all-but-invisible bodies like huge, pallid baseballs with eyes. A solemn old man with a straw hat perched firmly on top of his head watched him from the steps of a boarded-up grocery store. A scrawny tailor with a late customer paused to watch him by; he held up the lamp in his window for a better look. The gunslinger nodded. Neither the tailor nor his customer nodded back. He could feel their eyes resting heavily against the low-slung holsters that lay against his hips. A young boy, perhaps thirteen, and his girl crossed the street a block up, pausing imperceptibly. Their footfalls raised little hanging clouds of dust. A few of the street side lamps worked, but their glass sides were cloudy with congealed oil. Most had been crashed out. There was a livery, probably depending on the coach line for its survival. Three boys were crouched silently around a marble ring drawn in the dust to one side of the barn's gaping maw, smoking cornshuck cigarettes. They made long shadows in the yard.

The gunslinger led his mule past them and looked into the dim depths of the barn. One lamp glowed sunken ly, and a shadow jumped and flickered as a gangling old man in bib overalls forked loose timothy hay into the hay loft with huge, grunting swipes of his fork.

"Hey!" the gunslinger called.

The fork faltered and the hostler looked around waspishly. "Hey yourself!"

"I got a mule here."

"Good for you."

The gunslinger flicked a heavy, unevenly milled gold piece into the semi dark. It rang on the old, chaff-drifted boards and glittered.

The hostler came forward, bent, picked it up, squinted at the gunslinger. His eyes dropped to the gunbelts and he nodded sourly.

"How long you want him put up?"

"A night. Maybe two. Maybe longer."

"I ain't got no change for gold."

"I'm not asking for any."

"Blood money," the hostler muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing." The hostler caught the mule's bridle and led him inside.

"Rub him down!" the gunslinger called. The old man did not turn.

The gunslinger walked out to the boys crouched around the marble ring. They had watched the entire exchange with contemptuous interest

"How they hanging?" the gunslinger asked conversationally.

No answer.

"You dudes live in town?"

No answer.

One of the boys removed a crazily tilted twist of corn-shuck from his mouth, grasped a green cat's-eye marble, and squirted it into the dirt circle. It struck a croaker and knocked it outside. He picked up the cat's-eye and prepared to shoot again.

"There a restaurant in this town?" the gunslinger asked.

One of them looked up, the youngest There was a huge cold-sore at the corner of his mouth, but his eyes were still ingenuous. He looked at the gunslinger with hooded brimming wonder that was touching and frightening.

"Might get a burger at Sheb's."

"That the honky-tonk?"

The boy nodded but didn't speak. The eyes of his playmates had turned ugly and hostile.

The gunslinger touched the brim of his hat. "I'm grateful. It's good to know someone in this town is bright enough to talk."

He walked past, mounted the boardwalk and started down toward Sheb's, hearing the clear,

contemptuous voice of one of the others, hardly more than a childish treble:

"Weed-eater! How long you been screwin' your sister, Charlie? Weed-eater!"

There were three flaring kerosene lamps in front of Sheb's, one to each side and one nailed above the drunk-hung batwing doors. The chorus of Hey Jude had petered out, and the piano was plinking some other old ballad. Voices murmured like broken threads. The gunslinger paused outside for a moment, looking in. Sawdust floor, spittoons by the tipsy-legged tables. A plank bar on saw-horses. A gummy mirror behind it, reflecting the piano player, who wore an inevitable piano-stool slouch. The front of the piano had been removed so you could watch the wooden keys whonk up and down as the contraption was played. The bartender was a straw-haired woman wearing a dirty blue dress. One strap was held with a safety pin. There were perhaps six townies in the back of the room, juicing and playing Watch Me apathetically. Another half-dozen were grouped loosely about the piano. Four or five at the bar. And an old man with wild gray hair collapsed at a table by the doors. The gunslinger went in.

Heads swiveled to look at him and his guns. There was a moment of near silence, except for the oblivious piano player, who continued to tinkle. Then the woman mopped at the bar, and things shifted back.

"Watch me," one of the players in the corner said and matched three hearts with four spades, emptying his hand. The one with the hearts swore, handed over his bet, and the next was dealt.

The gunslinger approached the bar. "You got hamburger?" he asked.

"Sure." She looked him in the eye, and she might have been pretty when she started out, but now her face was lumpy and there was a livid scar corkscrewed across her forehead. She had powdered it heavily, but it called attention rather than camouflaging. "It's dear, though."

"I figured. Gimme three burgers and a beer."

Again that subtle shift in tone. Three hamburgers. Mouths watered and tongues liked at saliva with slow lust Three hamburgers.

"That would go you five bucks. With the beer."

The gunslinger put a gold piece on the bar.

Eyes followed it.

There was a sullenly smoldering charcoal brazier behind the bar and to the left of the mirror. The woman disappeared into a small room behind it and returned with meat on a paper. She scrimped out three patties and put them on the fire. The smell that arose was maddening. The gunslinger stood with stolid indifference, only peripherally aware of the faltering piano, the slowing of the card game, the sidelong glances of the barflies.

The man was halfway up behind him when the gunslinger saw him in the mirror. The man was almost completely bald, and his hand was wrapped around the haft of a gigantic hunting knife that was looped onto his belt like a holster.

"Go sit down," the gunslinger said quietly.

The man stopped. His upper lip lifted unconsciously, like a dog's, and there was a moment of silence. Then he

went back to his table, and the atmosphere shifted back again. His beer came in a cracked glass schooner. "I ain't got

change for gold," the woman said truculently.

"Don't expect any."

She nodded angrily, as if this show of wealth, even at her benefit, incensed her. But she took his gold, and a moment later the hamburgers came on a cloudy plate, still red around the edges.

"Do you have salt?"

She gave into him from underneath the bar. "Bread?"

"No." He knew she was lying, but he didn't push it. The bald man was staring at him with cyanosed eyes, his hands clenching and unclenching on the splintered and gouged surface of his table. His nostrils flared with pulsating regularity.

The gunslinger began to eat steadily, almost blandly, chopping the meat apart and forking it into his mouth, trying not to think of what might have been added to cut the beef.

He was almost through, ready to call for another beer and roll a smoke when the hand fell on his shoulder.

He suddenly became aware that the room had gone silent again, and he tasted thick tension in the air. He turned around and stared into the face of the man who had been asleep by the door when he entered. It was a terrible face. The odor of the devil-grass was a rank miasma. The eyes were damned, the staring, glaring eyes of those who see but do not see, eyes ever turned inward to the sterile hell of dreams beyond control, dreams unleashed, risen out of the stinking swamps of the unconscious.

The woman behind the bar made a small moaning sound.

The cracked lips writhed, lifted, revealing the green, mossy teeth, and the gunslinger thought: - He's not even smoking it anymore. He's chewing it. He's really chewing it.

And on the heels of that: - He's a dead man. He should have been dead a year ago.

And on the heels of that: - The man in black.

They stared at each other, the gunslinger and the man who had gone around the rim of madness.

He spoke, and the gunslinger, dumfounded, heard himself addressed in the High Speech:

"The gold for a favor, gunslinger. Just one? For a pretty."

The High Speech. For a moment his mind refused to track it. It had been years - God! - centuries, millenniums; there was no more High Speech, he was the last, the last gunslinger. The others were -Numbed, he reached into his breast pocket and produced a gold piece. The split, scrubbed hand reached for it, fondled it, held it up to reflect the greasy glare of the kerosene lamps. It threw off its proud civilized glow; golden, reddish, bloody.

"Ahhhhhh... "An inarticulate sound of pleasure. The old man did a weaving turn and began moving back to his table, holding the coin at eye level, turning it, flashing it.

The room was emptying rapidly, the batwings shuffling madly back and forth. The piano player closed the lid of his instrument with a bang and exited after the others in long, comic-opera strides.

"Sheb!" The woman screamed after him, her voice an odd mixture of fear and shrewishness, "Sheb, you come back here! Goddammit!"

The old man, meanwhile, had gone back to his table.

He spun the gold piece on the gouged wood, and the dead alive eyes followed it with empty fascination. He spun it a second time, a third, and his eyelids drooped. The fourth time, and his head settled to the wood before the coin stopped.

"There," she said softly, furiously. "You've driven out my trade. Are you satisfied?"

"They'll be back," the gunslinger said.

"Not tonight they won't."

"Who is he?" He gestured at the weed-eater.

"Go - "She completed the command by describing an impossible act of masturbation.

"I have to know," the gunslinger said patiently. "He-"

"He talked to you funny," she said. "Nort never talked like that in his life."

"I'm looking for a man. You would know him."

She stared at him, the anger dying. It was replaced with speculation, then with a high, wet gleam that he had seen before. The rickety building ticked thoughtfully to itself. A dog barked brayingly, far away. The gunslinger waited. She saw his knowledge and the gleam was replaced by hopelessness, by a dumb need that had no mouth.

"You know my price," she said.

He looked at her steadily. The scar would not show in the dark. Her body was lean enough so the desert and grit and grind hadn't been able to sag everything. And she'd once been pretty, maybe even beautiful. Not that it mattered. It would not have mattered if the grave-beetles had nested in the arid blackness of her womb. It had all been written.

Her hands came up to her face and there was still some juice left in her - enough to weep.

"Don't look! You don't have to look at me so mean!"

"I'm sorry," the gunslinger said. "I didn't mean to be mean."

"None of you mean it!" She cried at him.

"Put out the lights."

She wept, hands at her face. He was glad she had her hands at her face. Not because of the scar but because it gave her back her maidenhood, if not head. The pin that held the strap of her dress glittered in the greasy light.

"Put out the lights and lock up. Will he steal anything?"

"No," she whispered.

"Then put out the lights."

She would not remove her hands until she was behind him and she doused the lamps one by one, turning down the wicks and then breathing the flames into extinction. Then she took his hand in the dark and it was warm. She led him upstairs. There was no light to hide their act.

## VI

He made cigarettes in the dark, then lit them and passed one to her. The room held her scent, fresh lilac, pathetic. The smell of the desert had overlaid it, crippled it. It was like the smell

of the sea. He realized he was afraid of the desert ahead.

"His name is Nort," she said. No harshness had been worn out of her voice. "Just Nort. He died."  
The gunslinger waited.

"He was touched by God."

The gunslinger said, "I have never seen Him."

"He was here ever since I can remember – Nort, I mean, not God." She laughed jaggedly into the dark. "He had a honeywagon for a while. Started to drink. Started to smell the grass. Then to smoke it. The kids started to follow him around and sic their dogs onto him. He wore old green pants that stank. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"He started to chew it. At the last he just sat in there and didn't eat anything. He might have been a king, in his mind. The children might have been his jesters, and the dogs his princes."

"Yes."

"He died right in front of this place," she said. "He came clumping down the boardwalk – his boots wouldn't wear out, they were engineer boots – with the children and dogs behind him. He looked like wire clothes hangers all wrapped and twirled together. You could see all the lights of hell in his eyes, but he was grinning, just like the grins the children carve into their pumpkins on All-Saints Eve. You could smell the dirt and the rot and the weed. It was running down from the corners of his mouth like green blood. I think he meant to come in and listen to Sheb play the piano. And right in front, he stopped and cocked his head. I could see him, and I thought he heard a coach, although there was none due. Then he puked, and it was black and full of blood. It went right through that grin like sewer water through a grate. The stink was enough to make you want to run mad. He raised up his arms and just threw over. That was all. He died with that grin on his face, in his own vomit."

She was trembling beside him. Outside, the wind kept up its steady whine, and somewhere far away a door was banging, like a sound heard in a dream. Mice ran in the walls. The gunslinger thought in the back of his mind that it was probably the only place in town prosperous enough to support mice. He put a hand on her belly and she started violently, then relaxed.

"The man in black," he said.

"You have to have it, don't you!"

"Yes."

"All right. I'll tell you." She grasped his hand in both of hers and told him.

## VII

He came in the late afternoon of the day Nort died, and the wind was whooping up, pulling away the loose topsoil, sending sheets of grit and uprooted stalks of corn wind milling past. Kennerly had padlocked the livery, and the other few merchants had shuttered their windows and laid boards across the shutters. The sky was the yellow color of old cheese and the clouds moved flyingly across it, as if they had seen something horrifying in the desert wastes where they had so lately been.

He came in a rickety rig with a rippling tarp tied across its bed. They watched him come, and old man Kennerly, lying by the window with a bottle in one hand and the loose, hot flesh of his second-eldest daughter's left breast in the other, resolved not to be there if he should knock.

But the man in black went by without hawing the bay that pulled his rig, and the spinning wheels spumed up dust that the wind clutched eagerly. He might have been a priest or a monk; he wore a black cassock that had been floured with dust, and a loose hood covered his head and obscured his features. It rippled and flapped. Beneath the garment's hem, heavy buckled boots with square toes. He pulled up in front of Sheb's and tethered the horse, which lowered its head and grunted at the ground. Around the back of the rig he untied one flap, found a weathered saddlebag, threw it over his shoulder, and went in through the batwings.

Alice watched him curiously, but no one else noticed

his arrival. The rest were drunk as lords. Sheb was playing Methodist hymns ragtime, and the grizzled layabouts who had come in early to avoid the storm and to attend Nort's wake had sung themselves hoarse. Sheb, drunk nearly to the point of senselessness, intoxicated and horny with his own continued existence, played with hectic, shut tlecock speed, fingers flying like looms. Voices screeched and hollered, never overcoming the wind but sometimes seeming to challenge it. In the corner Zachary had thrown Amy Feldon's skirts over her head and was painting zodiac signs on her knees. A few other women circulated. A fervid glow seemed to be on all of them. The dull stormglow that filtered through the batwings seemed to mock them, however.

Nort had been laid out on two tables in the center of the room. His boots made a mystical V. His

mouth hung open in a slack grin, although someone had closed his eyes and put slugs on them. His hands had been folded on his chest with a sprig of devil-grass in them. He smelled like poison. The man in black pushed back his hood and came to the bar. Alice watched him, feeling trepidation mixed with the familiar want that hid within her. There was no religious symbol on him, although that meant nothing by itself.

"Whiskey," he said. His voice was soft and pleasant. "Good whiskey."

She reached under the counter and brought out a bottle of Star. She could have palmed off the local popskull on him as her best, but did not. She poured, and the man in black watched her. His eyes were large, luminous. The shadows were too thick to determine their color exactly. Her need intensified. The hollering and whooping went on behind, unabated. Sheb, the worthless gelding, was playing about the Christian Soldiers and somebody had persuaded Aunt Mill to sing. Her voice, warped and distorted, cut through the babble like a dull ax through a calf's brain.

"Hey, Allie!"

She went to serve, resentful of the stranger's silence, resentful of his no-color eyes and her own restless groin. She was afraid of her needs. They were capricious and beyond her control. They might be the signal of the change, which would in turn signal the beginning of her old age—a condition which in Tull was usually as short and bitter as a winter sunset.

She drew beer until the keg was empty, then broached another. She knew better than to ask Sheb, he would come willingly enough, like the dog he was, and would either chop off his own fingers or spume beer all over everything. The stranger's eyes were on her as she went about it; she could feel them.

"It's busy," he said when she returned. He had not touched his drink, merely rolled it between his palms to warm it.

"Wake," she said.

"I noticed the departed."

"They're bums," she said with sudden hatred. "All bums."

"It excites them. He's dead. They're not."

"He was their butt when he was alive. It's not right that he should be their butt now. It's..."

"She trailed off, not able to express what it was, or how it was obscene.

"Weed-eater?"

"Yes! What else did he have?"

Her tone was accusing, but he did not drop his eyes, and she felt the blood rush to her face. "I'm sorry. Are you a priest? This must revolt you."

"I'm not and it doesn't." He knocked the whiskey back neatly and did not grimace. "Once more, please."

"I'll have to see the color of your coin first. I'm sorry."

"No need to be."

He put a rough silver coin on the counter, thick on one edge, thin on the other, and she said as she would say later:

"I don't have change for this."

He shook his head, dismissing it, and watched absently as he poured again.

"Are you only passing through?" she asked.

He did not reply for a long time, and she was about to repeat when he shook his head impatiently.

"Don't talk trivialities. You're here with death."

She recoiled, hurt and amazed, her first thought being that he had lied about his holiness to test her.

"You cared for him," he said flatly. "Isn't that true?"

"Who? Nort?" She laughed, affecting annoyance to cover her confusion. "I think you better —"

"You're soft-hearted and a little afraid," he went on, "and he was on the weed, looking out hell's back door. And there he is, and they've even slammed the door now, and you don't think they'll open it until it's time for you to walk through, isn't it so?"

"What are you, drunk?"

"Mistuh Norton, he dead," the man in black intoned sardonically. "Dead as anybody. Dead as you or anybody."

"Get out of my place." She felt a trembling loathing spring up in her, but the warmth still radiated from her belly.

"It's all right," he said softly. "It's all right. Wait. Just wait."

The eyes were blue. She felt suddenly easy in her mind, as if she had taken a drug.

"See?" he asked her. "Do you see?"

She nodded dumbly and he laughed aloud — a fine, strong, untainted laugh that swung heads around. He whirled and faced them, suddenly made the center of attention by some unknown alchemy. Aunt

Mill faltered and subsided, leaving a cracked high note bleeding on the air. Sheb struck a discord and halted. They looked at the stranger uneasily. Sand rattled against the sides of the building. The silence held, spun itself out. Her breath had clogged in her throat and she looked down and saw both hands pressed to her belly beneath the bar. They all looked at him and he looked at them. Then the laugh burst forth again, strong, rich, beyond denial. But there was no urge to laugh along with him.

"I'll show you a wonder!" he cried at them. But they only watched him, like obedient children taken to see a magician in whom they have grown too old to believe.

The man in black sprang forward, and Aunt Mill drew away from him. He grinned fiercely and slapped her broad belly. A short, unwitting cackle was forced out of her, and the man in black threw back his head.

"It's better, isn't it?"

Aunt Mill cackled again, suddenly broke into sobs, and fled blindly through the doors. The others watched her go silently. The storm was beginning; shadows followed each other, rising and falling on the white cyclorama of the sky. A man near the piano with a forgotten beer in one hand made a groaning, grinning sound.

The man in black stood over Nort, grinning down at him. The wind howled and shrieked and thrummed. Something large struck the side of the building and bounced away. One of the men at the bar tore himself free and exited in looping, grotesque strides. Thunder racketed in sudden dry volleys.

"All right," the man in black grinned. "All right, let's get down to it."

He began to spit into Nort's face, aiming carefully. The spittle gleamed on his forehead, pearled down the shaven beak of his nose.

Under the bar, her hands worked faster.

Sheb laughed, loon-like, and hunched over. He began to cough up phlegm, huge and sticky gobs of it, and let fly. The man in black roared approval and pounded him on the back. Sheb grinned, one gold tooth twinkling.

Some fled. Others gathered in a loose ring around Nort. His face and the dewlapped rooster-wrinkles of his neck and upper chest gleamed with liquid - liquid so precious in this dry country. And suddenly it stopped, as if on signal. There was ragged, heavy breathing.

The man in black suddenly lunged across the body, jackknifing over it in a smooth arc. It was pretty, like a flash of water. He caught himself on his hands, sprang to his feet in a twist, grinning, and went over again. One of the watchers forgot himself, began to applaud, and suddenly backed away, eyes cloudy with terror. He slobbered a hand across his mouth and made for the door.

Nort twitched the third time the man in black went across.

A sound went through the watchers - a grunt - and then they were silent. The man in black threw his head back and howled. His chest moved in a quick, shallow rhythm as he sucked air. He began to go back and forth at a faster clip, pouring over Nort's body like water poured from one glass to another glass. The only sound in the room was the tearing rasp of his respiration and the rising pulse of the storm.

Nort drew a deep, dry breath. His hands rattled and pounded aimlessly on the table. Sheb screeched and exited. One of the women followed him.

The man in black went across once more, twice, thrice. The whole body was vibrating now, trembling and rapping and twitching. The smell of rot and excrement and decay billowed up in choking waves. His eyes opened.

Alice felt her feet propelling her backward. She struck the mirror, making it shiver, and blind panic took over. She bolted like a steer.

"I've given into you," the man in black called after her, panting. "Now you can sleep easy. Even that isn't irreversible. Although it's... so... goddamned...funny!" And he began to laugh again. The sound faded as she raced up the stairs, not stopping until the door to the three rooms above the bar was bolted.

She began to giggle then, rocking back and forth on her haunches by the door. The sound rose to a keening wail that mixed with the wind.

Downstairs, Nort wandered absently out into the storm to pull some weed. The man in black, now the only patron of the bar, watched him go, still grinning.

When she forced herself to go back down that evening, carrying a lamp in one hand and a heavy stick of stove-wood in the other, the man in black was gone, rig and all. But Nort was there, sitting at the table by the door as if he had never been away. The smell of the weed was on him, but not as heavily as she might have expected.

He looked up at her and smiled tentatively. "Hello, Allie."

"Hello, Nort." She put the stove wood down and began lighting the lamps, not turning her back to

him.

"I been touched by God," he said presently. "I ain't going to die no more. He said so. It was a promise."

"How nice for you, Nort." The spill she was holding dropped through her trembling fingers and she picked it up.

"I'd like to stop chewing the grass," he said. "I don't enjoy it no more. It don't seem right for a man touched by God to be chewing the weed."

"Then why don't you stop?"

Her exasperation startled her into looking at him as a man again, rather than an infernal miracle. What she saw was a rather sad-looking specimen only half-stoned, looking hangdog and ashamed. She could not be frightened by him anymore.

"I shake," he said. "And I want it. I can't stop. Allie, you was always so good to me - "he began to weep. "I can't even stop peeing myself."

She walked to the table and hesitated there, uncertain.

"He could have made me not want it," he said through the tears. "He could have done that if he could have made me be alive. I ain't complaining ... I don't want to complain... "He stared around hauntedly and whispered, "He might strike me dead if I did."

"Maybe it's a joke. He seemed to have quite a sense of humor."

Nort took his poke from where it dangled inside his shirt and brought out a handful of grass. Unthinkingly she knocked it away and then drew her hand back, horrified.

"I can't help it, Allie, I can't - "and he made a crippled dive for the poke. She could have stopped him, but she made no effort. She went back to lighting the lamps, tired although the evening had barely begun. But nobody came in that night except old man Kennerly, who had missed everything. He did not seem particularly surprised to see Nort. He ordered beer, asked where Sheb was, and pawed her. The next day things were almost normal, although none of the children followed Nort. The day after that, the catcalls resumed. Life had gotten back on its own sweet keel. The uprooted corn was gathered together by the children, and a week after Nort's resurrection, they burned it in the middle of the street. The fire was momentarily bright and most of the barflies stepped or staggered out to watch. They looked primitive. Their faces seemed to float between the flames and the ice-chip brilliance of the sky. Allie watched them and felt a pang of fleeting despair for the sad times of the world. Things had stretched apart There was no glue at the center of things anymore. She had never seen the ocean, never would.

"If I had grits," she murmured, "If I had guts, guts, guts..."

Nort raised his head at the sound of her voice and smiled emptily at her from hell. She had no guts. Only a bar and a scar.

The fire burned down rapidly and her customers came back in. She began to dose herself with the Star Whiskey, and by midnight she was blackly drunk.

## VIII

She ceased her narrative, and when he made no immediate comment, she thought at first that the story had put him to sleep. She had begun to drowse herself when he asked: "That's all?"

"Yes. That's all. It's very late."

"Um." He was rolling another cigarette.

"Don't go getting your tobacco dandruff in my bed," she told him, more sharply than she had intended.

"No."

Silence again. The tip of his cigarette winked off and on.

"You'll be leaving in the morning," she said dully.

"I should. I think he's left a trap for me here."

"Don't go," she said.

"We'll see."

He turned on his side away from her, but she was comforted. He would stay. She drowsed.

On the edge of sleep she thought again about the way Nort had addressed him, in that strange talk. She had not seen him express emotion before or since. Even his lovemaking had been a silent thing, and only at the last had his breathing roughened and then stopped for a minute. He was like something out of a fairytale or a myth, the last of his breed in a world that was writing the last page of its book. It didn't matter. He would stay for a while. Tomorrow was time enough to think, or the day after that. She slept.



IX

In the morning she cooked him grits which he ate without comment. He shoveled them into his mouth without thinking about her, hardly seeing her. He knew he should go. Every minute he sat here the man in black was further away – probably into the desert by now. His path had been undeviatingly south.

"Do you have a map?" he asked suddenly, looking up.

"Of the town?" she laughed. "There isn't enough of it to need a map."

"No. Of what's south of here."

Her smile faded. "The desert. Just the desert. I thought you'd stay for a little."

"What's south of the desert?"

"How would T know? Nobody crosses it. Nobody's tried since I was here." She wiped her hands on her apron, got potholders, and dumped the tub of water she had been heating into the sink, where it splashed and steamed.

He got up.

"Where are you going?" She heard the shrill fear in her voice and hated it.

"To the stable. If anyone knows, the hostler will." He

put his hands on her shoulders. The hands were warm. "And to arrange for my mule. If I'm going to be here, he should be taken care of. For when I leave."

But not yet. She looked up at him. "But you watch that Kennerly. If he doesn't know a thing, he'll make it up."

When he left she turned to the sink, feeling the hot, warm drift of her grateful tears.

x

Kennerly was toothless, unpleasant, and plagued with daughters. Two half-grown ones peeked at the gunslinger from the dusty shadows of the barn. A baby drooled happily in the dirt. A full-grown one, blonde, dirty, sensual, watched with a speculative curiosity as she drew water from the groaning pump beside the building.

The hostler met him halfway between the door to his establishment and the street. His manner vacillated between hostility and a craven sort of fawning – like a stud mongrel that has been kicked too often.

"It's bein' cared for," he said, and before the gunslinger could reply, Kennerly turned on his daughter: "You get in, Soobie! You get right the hell in!"

Soobie began to drag her bucket sullenly toward the shack appended to the barn.

"You meant my mule," the gunslinger said.

"Yes, sir. Ain't seen a mule in quite a time. Time was they used to grow up wild for want of 'em, but the world has moved on. Ain't seen nothin' but a few oxen and the coach horses and. . .

Soobie, I'll whale you, 'fore God!"

"I don't bite," the gunslinger said pleasantly.

Kennerly cringed a little. ' It ain't you. No, sir, it ain't you." He grinned loosely. "She's just naturally gawky.

She's got a devil. She's wild." His eyes darkened. "It's coming to Last Times, mister. You know how it says in the Book. Children won't obey their parents, and a plague'll be visited on the multitudes."

The gunslinger nodded, then pointed south. "What's out there?"

Kennerly grinned again, showing gums and a few sociable yellow teeth. "Dwellers. Weed. Desert. What else?" He cackled, and his eyes measured the gunslinger coldly.

"How big is the desert?"

"Big." Kennerly endeavored to look serious. "Maybe three hundred miles. Maybe a thousand. I can't tell you, mister. There's nothing out there but devil-grass and maybe demons. That's the way the other fella went The one who fixed up Norty when he was sick."

"Sick? I heard he was dead."

Kennerly kept grinning. "Well, well. Maybe. But we're growed-up men, ain't we?"

"But you believe in demons."

Kennerly looked affronted. "That's a lot different."

The gunslinger took off his hat and wiped his forehead. The sun was hot, beating steadily. Kennerly seemed not to notice. In the thin shadow by the livery, the baby girl was gravely smearing dirt on her face.

"You don't know what's after the desert?"

Kennerly shrugged. "Some might. The coach ran through part of it fifty years ago. My pap said so. He used to say 'twas mountains. Others say an ocean... a green ocean with monsters. And some say that's where the world ends. That there ain't nothing but lights that'll drive a man blind and the face of God with his mouth open to eat them up."

"Drivel," the gunslinger said shortly.

"Sure it is." Kennerly cried happily. He cringed again, hating, fearing, wanting to please.

"You see my mule is looked after." He flicked Kennerly another coin, which Kennerly caught on the fly.

"Surely. You stayin' a little?"

"I guess I might."

"That Allie's pretty nice when she wants to be, ain't she?"

"Did you say something?" The gunslinger asked remotely.

Sudden terror dawned in Kennerly's eyes, like twin moons coming over the horizon. "No, sir, not a word. And I'm sorry if I did." He caught sight of Soobie leaning out a window and whirled on her.

"I'll whale you now, you little slut-face! 'Fore God! I'll - "

The gunslinger walked away, aware that Kennerly had turned to watch him, aware of the fact that he could whirl and catch the hostler with some true and untinctured emotion distilled on his face. He let it slip. It was hot. The only sure thing about the desert was its size. And it wasn't all played out in this town. Not yet.

## XI

They were in bed when Sheb kicked the door open and came in with the knife.

It had been four days, and they had gone by in a blinking haze. He ate. He slept. He made sex with Allie. He found that she played the fiddle and he made her play it for him. She sat by the window in the milky light of daybreak, only a profile, and played something haltingly that might have been good if she had been trained. He felt a growing (but strangely absent-minded) affection for her and thought this might be the trap the man in black had left behind. He read dry and tattered back issues of magazines with faded pictures. He thought very little about everything.

He didn't hear the little piano player come up - his

reflexes had sunk. That didn't seem to matter either, although it would have frightened him badly in another time and place.

Allie was naked, the sheet below her breasts, and they were preparing to make love.

"Please," she was saying. "Like before, I want that, I want - "

The door crashed open and the piano player made his ridiculous, knock-kneed run for the sun. Allie did not scream, although Sheb held an eight-inch carving knife in his hand. Sheb was making a noise, an inarticulate blabbering. He sounded like a man being drowned in a bucket of mud. Spittle flew. He brought the knife down with both hands, and the gunslinger caught his wrists and turned them. The knife went flying. Sheb made a high screeching noise, like a rusty screen door. His hands fluttered in marionette movements, both wrists broken. The wind gritted against the window. Allie's glass on the wall, faintly clouded and distorted, reflected the room.

"She was mine!" He wept. "She was mine first! Mine!"

Allie looked at him and got out of bed. She put on a wrapper, and the gunslinger felt a moment of empathy for a man who must be seeing himself coming out on the far end of what he once had. He was just a little man, and gelded.

"It was for you," Sheb sobbed. "It was only for you, Allie. It was you first and it was all for you. I - ah, oh God, dear God - "The words dissolved into a paroxysm of un-intelligibilities, finally to tears. He rocked back and forth, holding his broken wrists to his belly.

"Shhh. Shhh. Let me see." She knelt beside him. "Broken. Sheb, you ass. Didn't you know you were never strong?" She helped him to his feet. He tried to hold his hands to his face, but they would not obey, and he wept nakedly. "Come on over to the table and let me see what I can do."

She led him to the table and set his wrists with slats of

kindling from the fire box. He wept weakly and without volition, and left without looking back.

She came back to the bed. "Where were we?"

"No," he said.

She said patiently, "You knew about that. There's nothing to be done. What else is there?" She touched his shoulder. "Except I'm glad that you are so strong."

"Not now," he said thickly.

"I can make you strong -"

"No," he said. "You can't do that."

XII

The next night the bar was closed. It was whatever passed for the Sabbath in Tull. The gunslinger went to the tiny, leaning church by the graveyard while Allie washed tables with strong disinfectant and rinsed kerosene lamp chimnies in soapy water.

An odd purple dusk had fallen, and the church, lit from the inside, looked almost like a blast furnace from the road.

"I don't go," Allie had said shortly. "The woman who preaches has poison religion. Let the respectable ones go.

He stood in the vestibule, hidden in a shadow, looking in. The pews were gone and the congregation stood (he saw Kennerly and his brood; Castner, owner of the town's scrawny dry-goods emporium and his slat-sided wife; a few barflies; a few "town" women he had never seen before; and, surprisingly, Sheb). They were singing a hymn raggedly, a cappella. He looked curiously at the mountainous woman at the pulpit. Allie had said: "She lives alone, hardly ever sees anybody. Only comes out on Sunday to serve up the hellfire. Her name is Sylvia Pittston. She's crazy, but she's got the hoodoo on them. They like it that way. It suits them."

No description could take the measure of the woman.

Breasts like earthworks. A huge pillar of a neck overtopped by a pasty white moon of a face, in which blinked eyes so large and so dark that they seemed to be bottomless tarns. Her hair was a beautiful rich brown and it was piled atop her head in a haphazard, lunatic sprawl, held by a hairpin big enough to be a meat skewer. She wore a dress that seemed to be made of burlap. The arms that held the hymnal were slabs. Her skin was creamy, unmarked, lovely. He thought that she must top three hundred pounds. He felt a sudden red lust for her that made him feel shaky, and he turned his head and looked away.

"Shall we gather at the river,  
The beautiful, the beautiful,  
The riiiiiver,  
Shall we gather at the river,  
That flows by the Kingdom of God."

The last note of the last chorus faded off, and there was a moment of shuffling and coughing. She waited. When they were settled, she spread her hands over them, as if in benediction. It was an evocative gesture.

"My dear little brothers and sisters in Christ."

It was a haunting line. For a moment the gunslinger felt mixed feelings of nostalgia and fear, stitched in with an eerie feeling of deja vu – he thought: I dreamed this. When? He shook it off. The audience – perhaps twenty-five all told – had become dead silent.

"The subject of our meditation tonight is The Interloper." Her voice was sweet, melodious, the speaking voice of a well-trained soprano.

"A little rustle ran through the audience.

"I feel," Sylvia Pittston said reflectively, "I feel that I know everyone in The Book personally. In the last five years I have worn out five Bibles, and uncountable numbers before that. I love the story, and I love the players in that story. I have walked arm in arm in the lion's den with Daniel. I stood with David when he was tempted by Bath sheba as she bathed at the pool. I have been in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. I slew two thousand with Samson and was blinded with St. Paul on the road to Damascus. I wept with Mary at Golgotha."

A soft, shurring sigh in the audience.

"I have known and loved them. There is only one –one – "she held up a finger – "only one player in the greatest of all dramas that I do not know. Only one who stands outside with his face in the shadow. Only one that makes my body tremble and my spirit quail. I fear him. I don't know his mind and I fear him. I fear The Interloper."

Another sigh. One of the women had put a hand over her mouth as if to stop a sound and was rocking, rocking.

"The Interloper who came to Eve as a snake on its belly, grinning and writhing. The Interloper who walked among the Children of Israel while Moses was up on the Mount, who whispered to them to make a golden idol, a golden calf, and to worship it with foulness and fornication."

Moans, nods.

"The Interloper! He stood on the balcony with Jezebel and watched as King Ahaz fell screaming to his death, and he and she grinned as the dogs gathered and lapped up his life's blood. Oh, my little brothers and sisters, watch thou for The Interloper."

"Yes, O Jesus – "The man the gunslinger had first noticed coming into town, the one with the straw

hat.

"He's always been there, my brothers and sisters. But I don't know his mind. And you don't know his mind. Who could understand the awful darkness that swirls there, the pride like pylons, the titanic blasphemy, the unholy glee? And the madness! The cyclopean, gibbering madness that walks and crawls and wriggles through men's most awful wants and desires?"

"O Jesus Savior - "

"It was him who took our Lord up on the mountain -""Yes - "

"It was him that tempted him and shewed him all the world and the world's pleasures -"Yesss - "

"It's him that will come back when Last Times come on the world.., and they are coming, my brothers and sisters, can't you feel they are?"

"Yesss - "

Rocking and sobbing, the congregation became a sea; the woman seemed to point at all of them, none of them.

"It's him that will come as the Antichrist, to lead men into the flaming bowels of perdition, to the bloody end of wickedness, as Star Wormwood hangs blazing in the sky, as gall gnaws at the vitals of the children, as women's wombs give forth monstrosities, as the works of men's hands turn to blood - "

"Ahhh - "

"Ah, God - "

"Gawwwwwwww - "

A woman fell on the floor, her legs crashing up and down against the wood. One of her shoes flew off.

"It's him that stands behind every fleshly pleasure ... him! The Interloper!"

"Yes, Lord!"

A man fell on his knees, holding his head and braying.

"When you take a drink, who holds the bottle?"

"The Interloper!"

"When you sit down to a faro or a Watch Me table, who turns the cards?"

"The Interloper!"

"When you riot in the flesh of another's body, when you pollute yourself, who are you selling your soul to?"

"In - "

"The - "

"Oh, Jesus . . . Oh - "

"- looper -

"-Aw...Aw...Aw... "

"And who is he?" She screamed (but calm within, he could sense the calmness, the mastery, the control, the domination. He thought suddenly, with terror and absolute surety: he has left a demon in her. She is haunted. He felt the hot ripple of sexual desire again through his fear.)

The man who was holding his head crashed and blundered forward.

"I'm in hell!" He screamed up at her. His face twisted and writhed as if snakes crawled beneath his skin. "I done fornications! I done gambling! I done weed! I done sins! I

- " But his voice rose skyward in a dreadful, hysterical wail that drowned articulation. He held his head as if it would burst like an overripe cantaloupe at any moment.

The audience stilled as if a cue had been given, frozen in their half-erotic poses of ecstasy.

Sylvia Pittston reached down and grasped his head. The man's cry ceased as her fingers, strong and white, unblemished and gentle, worked through his hair. He looked up at her dumbly.

"Who was with you in sin?" She asked. Her eyes looked into his, deep enough, gentle enough, cold enough to drown in.

"The.. . the Interloper."

"Called who?"

"Called Satan." Raw, oozing whisper.

"Will you renounce?"

Eagerly: "Yes! Yes! Oh, my Jesus Savior!"

She rocked his head; he stared at her with the blank, shiny eyes of the zealot. "If he walked through that door

- " she hammered a finger at the vestibule shadows where the gunslinger stood - "would you renounce him to his face?"

"On my mother's name!"

"Do you believe in the eternal love of Jesus?"

He began to weep. "Your fucking-A I do - "

"He forgives you that, Jonson."

"Praise God," Jonson said, still weeping.

"I know he forgives you just as I know he will cast out the unrepentant from his palaces and into the place of burning darkness. "

"Praise God. " The congregation drained, spoke it solemnly.

"Just as I know this Interloper, this Satan, this Lord of Flies and Serpents will be cast down and crushed. . . will you crush him if you see him, Jonson?"

"Yes and praise God!" Jonson wept.

"Will you crush him if you see him, brothers and sisters?"

"Yess... " Sated.

"If you see him sashaying down Main St tomorrow?"

"Praise God... "

The gunslinger, unsettled, at the same time, faded back out the door and headed for town. The smell of the desert was clear in the air. Almost time to move on. Almost

#### XIII

In bed again.

"She won't see you," Allie said. She sounded frightened. "She doesn't see anybody. She only comes out on Sunday evenings to scare the hell out of everybody."

"How long has she been here?"

"Twelve years or so. Let's not talk about her."

"Where did she come from? Which direction?"

"I don't know." Lying.

"Allie?"

"I don't know!"

"Allie?"

"All right! All right! She came from the dwellers! From the desert!"

"I thought so." He relaxed a little. "Where does she live?"

Her voice dropped a notch. "If I tell you, will you make love to me?"

"You know the answer to that."

She sighed. It was an old, yellow sound, like turning pages. "She has a house over the knoll in back of the church. A little shack. It's where the . . . the real minister used to live until he moved out. Is that enough? Are you satisfied?"

"No. Not yet." And he rolled on top of her.

#### XIV

It was the last day, and he knew it.

The sky was an ugly, bruised purple, weirdly lit from above with the first fingers of dawn. Allie moved about like a wraith, lighting lamps, tending the corn fritters that spluttered in the skillet. He had loved her hard after she had told him what he had to know, and she had sensed the coming end and had given more than she had ever given, and she had given it with desperation against the coming of dawn, given it with the tireless energy of sixteen. But she was pale this morning, on the brink of menopause again.

She served him without a word. He ate rapidly, chewing, swallowing, chasing each bite with hot coffee. Allie went to the batwings and stood staring out at the morning, at the silent battalions of slow-moving clouds.

"It's going to dust up today. "

"I'm not surprised."

"Are you ever?" She asked ironically, and turned to watch him get his hat. He clapped it on his head and brushed past her.

"Sometimes," he told her. He only saw her once more alive.

#### XV

By the time he reached Sylvia Pittston's shack, the wind had died utterly and the whole world seemed to wait. He had been in desert country long enough to know that the longer the lull, the harder the wind would blow when it finally decided to start up. A queer, flat light hung over everything.

There was a large wooden cross nailed to the door of the place, which was leaning and tired. He rapped and waited. No answer. He rapped again. No answer. He drew back and kicked in the door with

one hard shot of his right boot. A small bolt on the inside ripped free. The door banged against a haphazardly planked wall and scared rats into skittering flight. Sylvania Pittston sat in the hall, sat in a mammoth darkwood rocker, and looked at him calmly with those great and dark eyes. The stormlight fell on her cheeks in terrifying half-tones. She wore a shawl. The rocker made tiny squeaking noises.

They looked at each other for a long, clockless moment.

"You will never catch him," she said. "You walk in the way of evil."

"He came to you," the gunslinger said.

"And to my bed. He spoke to me in the Tongue. He - "

"He screwed you. "

She did not flinch. "You walk an evil way, gunslinger. You stand in shadows. You stood in the shadows of the holy

place last night. Did you think I couldn't see you?"

"Why did he heal the weed-eater?"

"He was an angel of God. He said so."

"I hope he smiled when he said it."

She drew her lip back from her teeth in an unconsciously feral gesture. "He told me you would follow. He told me what to do. He said you are the Antichrist"

The gunslinger shook his head. "He didn't say that."

She smiled up at him lazily. "He said you would want to bed me. Do you?"

"Yes."

"The price is your life, gunslinger. He has got me with child... the child of an angel. If you invade me - " She let the lazy smile complete her thought. At the same time she gestured with her huge, mountainous thighs. They stretched beneath her garment like pure marble slabs. The effect was dizzying.

The gunslinger dropped his hands to the butts of his pistols. "You have a demon, woman. I can remove it"

The effect was instantaneous. She recoiled against the chair, and a weasel look flashed on her face. "Don't touch me! Don't come near me! You dare not touch the Bride of God!"

"Want to bet?" the gunslinger said, grinning. He stepped toward her.

The flesh on the huge frame quaked. Her face had become a caricature of crazed terror, and she stabbed the sign of the Eye at him with pronged fingers.

"The desert," the gunslinger said. "What after the desert?"

"You'll never catch him! Never! Never! You'll burn! He told me so!"

"I'll catch him," the gunslinger said. "We both know it. What is beyond the desert?"

"No!"

"Answer me!"

"No!"

He slid forward, dropped to his knees, and grabbed her thighs. Her legs locked like a vise. She made strange, lustful keening noises.

"The demon, then," he said.

"No - "

He pried the legs apart and upholstered one of his guns.

"No! No! No!" Her breath came in short, savage grunts.

"Answer me. "

She rocked in the chair and the floor trembled. Prayers and garbled bits of jargon flew from her lips.

He rammed the barrel of the gun forward. He could feel the terrified wind sucked into her lungs more than he could hear it. Her hands beat at his head; her legs drummed against the floor. And at the same time the huge body tried to take the invader and enwomb it. Outside nothing watched them but the bruised sky.

She screamed something, high and inarticulate.

"What?"

"Mountains!"

"What about them?"

"He stops... on the other side... s-s-sweet Jesus!... to in-make his strength. Med-in-meditation, do you understand? Oh . . . I'm . . . I'm . . . "

The whole huge mountain of flesh suddenly strained forward and upward, yet he was careful not to let her secret flesh touch him.

Then she seemed to wilt and grow smaller, and she wept with her hands in her lap. "So," he said, getting up. "The demon is served, eh?" "Get out. You've killed the child. Get out Get out." He stopped at the door and looked back. "No child," he said briefly. "No angel, no demon." "Leave me alone."

He did.

XVI

By the time he arrived at Kennerly's, a queer obscurity had come over the northern horizon and he knew it was dust. Over Tull the air was still dead quiet. Kennerly was waiting for him on the chaff-strewn stage that was the floor of his barn. "Leaving?" He grinned abjectly at the gunslinger.

"Yes."

"Not before the storm?"

"Ahead of it"

"The wind goes faster than a man on a mule. In the open it can kill you."

"I'll want the mule now," the gunslinger said simply.

"Sure." But Kennerly did not turn away, merely stood as if searching for something further to say, grinning his groveling, hate-filled grin, and his eyes flicked up and over the gunslinger's shoulder.

The gunslinger sidestepped and turned at the same time, and the heavy stick of stovewood that the girl Soobie held swished through the air, grazing his elbow only. She lost hold of it with the force of her swing and it clattered over the floor. In the explosive height of the loft, barn swallows took shadowed wing.

The girl looked at him bovinely. Her breasts thrust with overripe grandeur at the wash-faded shirt she wore. One thumb sought the haven of her mouth with dreamlike slowness.

The gunslinger turned back to Kennerly. Kennerly's grin was huge. His skin was waxy yellow. His eyes rolled in their sockets. "I - " he began in a phlegm-filled whisper and could not continue.

"The mule," the gunslinger prodded gently.

"Sure, sure, sure," Kennerly whispered, the grin now touched with incredulity. He shuffled after it.

He moved to where he could watch Kennerly, The hostler brought the mule back and handed him the bridle.

"You get in an tend your sister," he said to Soobie.

Soobie tossed her head and didn't move.

The gunslinger left them there, staring at each other across the dusty, droppings-strewn floor, he with his sick grin, she with dumb, inanimate defiance. Outside the heat was still like a hammer.

XVII

He walked the mule up the center of the street, his boots sending up squirts of dust His waterbags were strapped across the mule's back.

He stopped at Sheb's, and Allie was not there. The place was deserted, battened for the storm, but still dirty from the night before. She had not begun her cleaning and the place was as fetid as a wet dog.

He filled his tote sack with corn meal, dried and roasted corn, and half of the raw hamburger in the cooler. He left four gold pieces stacked on the planked counter. Allie did not come down. Sheb's piano bid him a silent, yellow-toothed good-by. He stepped back out and cinched the tote sack across the mule's back. There was a tight feeling in his throat. He might still avoid the trap, but the chances were small. He was, after all, the interloper.

He walked past the shuttered, waiting buildings, feeling the eyes that peered through cracks and chinks. The man in black had played God in Tull. Was it only a sense of the cosmic comic, or a matter of desperation? It was a question of some importance.

There was a shrill, harried scream from behind him, and doors suddenly threw themselves open. Forms lunged. The trap was sprung, then. Men in long handles and men in dirty dungarees. Women in slacks and in faded dresses.

Even children, tagging after their parents. And in every hand there was a chunk of wood or a knife.

His reaction was automatic, instantaneous, inbred. He whirled on his heels while his hands pulled

the guns from their holsters, the hafts heavy and sure in his hands. It was Allie, and of course it had to be Allie, coming at him with her face distorted, the scar a hellish purple in the lowering light. He saw that she was held hostage; the distorted, grimacing face of Sheb peered over her shoulder like a witch's familiar. She was his shield and sacrifice. He saw it all, clear and shadowless in the frozen deathless light of the sterile calm, and heard her:

"He's got me 0 Jesus don't shoot don't don't don't - "

But the hands were trained. He was the last of his breed and it was not only his mouth that knew the High Speech. The guns beat their heavy, atonal music into the air. Her mouth flapped and she sagged and the guns fired again. Sheb's head snapped back. They both fell into the dust. Sticks flew through the air, rained on him. He staggered, fended them off. One with a nail pounded raggedly through it ripped at his arm and drew blood. A man with a beard stubble and sweat-stained armpits lunged flying at him with a dull kitchen knife held in one paw. The gunslinger shot him dead and the man thumped into the street. His teeth clicked audibly as his chin struck.

"SATAN!" Some was screaming: "THE ACCURSED! BRING HIM DOWN!"

"THE INTERLOPER!" Another voice cried. Sticks rained on him. A knife struck his boot and bounced. "THE

INTERLOPER! THE ANTICHRIST!"

He blasted his way through the middle of them, running as the bodies fell, his hands picking the targets with dreadful accuracy. Two men and a woman went down, and he ran through the hole they left.

He led them a feverish parade across the street and toward the rickety general store/barber shop that faced Sheb's. He mounted the boardwalk, turned again, and fired the rest of his loads into the charging crowd. Behind them, Sheb and Allie and the others lay crucified in the dust.

They never hesitated or faltered, although every shot he fired found a vital spot and although they had probably never seen a gun except for pictures in old magazines.

He retreated, moving his body like a dancer to avoid the flying missiles. He reloaded as he went, with a rapidity that had also been trained into his fingers. They shuttled busily between gunbelts and cylinders. The mob came up over the boardwalk and he stepped into the general store and rammed the door closed. The large display window to the right shattered inward and three men crowded through. Their faces were zealously blank, their eyes filled with bland fire. He shot them all, and the two that followed them. They fell in the window, hung on the jutting shards of glass, choking the opening.

The door crashed and shuddered with their weight and he could hear her voice: "THE KILLER! YOUR SOULS! THE CLOVEN HOOF!"

The door ripped off its hinges and fell straight in, making a flat handclap. Dust puffed up from the floor. Men, women, and children charged him. Spittle and stove-wood flew. He shot his guns empty and they fell like nine-pins. He retreated, shoving over a flour barrel, rolling it at them, into the barbershop, throwing a pan of boiling water that contained two nicked straight-razors. They came on, screaming with frantic incoherency. From somewhere, Sylvia Pittston exhorted them, her voice rising and falling on blind inflections. He pushed shells into hot chambers, smelling the smells of shave and tonsure, smelling his own flesh as the calluses at the tips of his fingers singed.

He went through the back door and onto the porch. The flat scrubland was at his back now, flatly denying the town that crouched against its huge haunch. Three men hustled around the corner, with large betrayer grins on their faces. They saw him, saw him seeing them, and the grins curdled in the second before he mowed them down. A woman had followed them, howling. She was large and fat and known to the patrons of Sheb's as Aunt Mill. The gunslinger blew her backwards and she landed in a whorish sprawl, her skirt kinked up between her thighs.

He went down the steps and walked backwards into the desert, ten paces, twenty. The back door of the barber shop flew open and they boiled out. He caught a glimpse of Sylvia Pittston. He opened up. They fell in squats, they fell backwards, they tumbled over the railing into the dust. They cast no shadows in the deathless purple light of the day. He realized he was screaming. He had been screaming all along. His eyes felt like cracked ball bearings. His balls had drawn up against his belly. His legs were wood. His ears were iron.

The guns were empty and they boiled at him, transmogrified into an Eye and a Hand, and he stood, screaming and reloading, his mind far away and absent, letting his hands do their reloading trick. Could he hold up a hand, tell them he had spent twenty-five years learning this trick and others, tell them of the guns and the blood that had blessed them? Not with his mouth. But his hands could speak their own tale.

They were in throwing range as he finished reloading, and a stick struck him on the forehead and brought blood in abraded drops. In two seconds they would be in gripping distance. In the



forefront he saw Kennerly; Kennerly's younger daughter, perhaps eleven; Soobie; two male barflies; a female barfly named Amy Feldon. He let them all have it, and the ones behind them. Their bodies thumped

like scarecrows. Blood and brains flew in streamers.

They halted for a moment, startled, the mob face shivering into individual, bewildered faces. A man ran in a large, screaming circle. A woman with blisters on her hands turned her head up and cackled feverishly at the sky. The man whom he had first seen sitting gravely on the steps of the mercantile store made a sudden and amazing load in his pants.

He had time to reload one gun.

Then it was Sylvia Pittston, running at him, waving a wooden cross in each hand. "DEVIL! DEVIL! DEVIL! CHILD-KILLER! MONSTER! DESTROY HIM, BROTHERS AND SISTERS! DESTROY THE CHILD-KILLING INTERLOPER!"

He put a shot into each of the crosspieces, blowing the roods to splinters, and four more into the woman's head. She seemed to accordian into herself and waver like a shimmer of heat.

They all stared at her for a moment in tableau, while the gunslinger's fingers did their reloading trick. The tips of his fingers sizzled and burned. Neat circles were branded into the tips of each one.

There were less of them, now; he had run through them like a mower's scythe. He thought they would break with the woman dead, but someone threw a knife. The hilt struck him squarely between the eyes and knocked him over. They ran at him in a reaching, vicious clot. He fired his guns empty again, lying in his own spent shells. His head hurt and he saw large brown circles in front of his eyes. He missed one shot, downed eleven.

But they were on him, the ones that were left He fired the four shells he had reloaded, and then they were beating him, stabbing him. He threw a pair of them off his left arm and rolled away. His hands began doing their infallible trick. He was stabbed in the shoulder. He was stabbed in the back. He was hit across the ribs. He was stabbed in the ass. A small boy squirmed at him and made the only deep cut, across the bulge of his calf. The gunslinger blew his head off.

They were scattering and he let them have it again. The ones left began to retreat toward the sand-colored, pitted buildings, and still the hands did their trick, like over-eager dogs that want to do their rolling-over trick for you not once or twice but all night, and the hands were cutting them down as they ran. The last one made it as far as the steps of the barber shop's back porch, and then the gunslinger's bullet took him in the back of the head.

Silence came back in, filling jagged spaces.

The gunslinger was bleeding from perhaps twenty different wounds, all of them shallow except for the cut across his calf. He bound it with a strip of shirt and then straightened and examined his kill.

They trailed in a twisted, zigzagging path from the back door of the barber shop to where he stood. They lay in all positions. None of them seemed to be sleeping.

He followed them back, counting as he went. In the general store one man lay with his arms wrapped lovingly around the cracked candy jar he had dragged down with him.

He ended up where he had started, in the middle of the deserted main street He had shot and killed thirty-nine men, fourteen women, and five children. He had shot and killed everyone in Tull.

A sickish-sweet odor came to him on the first of the dry, stirring wind. He followed it, then looked up and nodded. The decaying body of Nort was spread-eagled atop the plank roof of Sheb's, crucified with wooden pegs. Mouth and eyes were open. A large and purple cloven hoof had been pressed into the skin of his grimy forehead.

He walked out of town. His mule was standing in a clump of weed about forty yards out along the remnant of the coach road. The gunslinger led it back to Kennerly's stable. Outside, the wind was playing a ragtime tune. He put the mule up and went back to Sheb's. He found a ladder in the back shed, went up to the roof, and cut Nort down. The body was lighter than a bag of sticks. He tumbled it down to join the common people. Then he went back inside, ate hamburgers and drank three beers while the light failed and the sand began to fly. That night he slept in the bed where he and Allie had lain. He had no dreams. The next morning the wind was gone and the sun was its usual bright and forgetful self. The bodies had gone south like tumble-weeds with the wind. At midmorning, after he had bound all his cuts, he moved on as well.

#### XVIII

He thought Brown had fallen asleep. The fire was down to a spark and the bird, Zoltan, had put his head under his wing.

Just as he was about to get up and spread a pallet in the corner, Brown said, "There. You've told it. Do you feel better?"

The gunslinger started. "Why would I feel bad?"

"You're human, you said. No demon. Or did you lie?"

"I didn't lie." He felt the grudging admittance in him:

he liked Brown. Honestly did. And he hadn't lied to the dweller in any way. "Who are you, Brown? Really, I mean. "

"Just me," he said, unperturbed. "Why do you have to think you're such a mystery?"

The gunslinger lit a smoke without replying.

"I think you're very close to your man in black," Brown said. "Is he desperate?"

"I don't know. "

"Are you?"

"Not yet," the gunslinger said. He looked at Brown with a shade of defiance. "I do what I have to do."

"That's good then," Brown said and turned over and went to sleep.

## XIX

In the morning Brown fed him and sent him on his way. In the daylight he was an amazing figure with his scrawny, burnt chest, pencil-like collarbones and ring leted shock of red hair. The bird perched on his shoulder.

"The mule?" The gunslinger asked.

"I'll eat it," Brown said.

"Okay."

Brown offered his hand and the gunslinger shook it. The dweller nodded to the south. "Walk easy. "

"You know it."

They nodded at each other and then the gunslinger walked away, his body festooned with guns and water. He looked back once. Brown was rooting furiously at his little combed. The crow was perched on the low roof of his dwelling like a gargoyle.

## XX

The fire was down, and the stars had begun to pale off. The wind walked restlessly. The gunslinger twitched in his sleep and was still again. He dreamed a thirsty dream. In the darkness the shape of the mountains was invisible. The thoughts of guilt had faded. The desert had baked them out. He found himself thinking more and more about Cort, who had taught him to shoot, instead. Cort had known black from white.

He stirred again and awoke. He blinked at the dead fire with its own shape superimposed over the other, more

geometrical one. He was a romantic, he knew it, and he guarded the knowledge jealously.

That, of course, made him think of Cort again. He didn't know where Cort was. The world had moved on.

The gunslinger shouldered his tote sack and moved on with it.

## THE WAY STATION

A nursery rhyme had been playing itself through his mind all day, the maddening kind of thing that will not let go, that stands mockingly outside the apse of the conscious mind and makes faces at the rational being inside. The rhyme was:

The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

There is joy and also pain

but the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

Pretty-plain, loony-sane

The ways of the world all will change and all the ways remain the same

but if you're mad or only sane

the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

We walk in love but fly in chains  
And the planes in Spain fall mainly in the rain.

He knew why the rhyme had occurred to him. There had been the recurring dream of his room in the castle and of his father, who had sung it to him as he lay solemnly in the tiny bed by the window of many colors. She did not sing it at bedtimes because all small boys born to the High Speech must face the dark alone, but she sang to him at nap-times and he could remember the heavy gray rain light that shivered into colors on the counterpane; he could feel the coolness of the room and the heavy warmth of blankets, love for his mother and her red lips, the haunting melody of the little nonsense lyric, and her voice.

Now it came back maddeningly, like prickly heat, chasing its own tail in his mind as he walked. All his water was gone, and he knew he was very likely a dead man. He had never expected it to come to this, and he was sorry. Since noon he had been watching his feet rather than watching the way ahead. Out here even the devil-grass had grown stunted and yellow. The hardpan had disintegrated in places to mere rubble. The mountains were not noticeably clearer, although sixteen days had passed since he had left the hut of the last homesteader, a loony-sane young man on the edge of the desert He had had a raven, the gunslinger remembered, but he couldn't remember the raven's name.

He watched his feet move up and down, listened to the nonsense rhyme sing itself into a pitiful garble in his mind, and wondered when he would fall down for the first time. He didn't want to fall, even though there was no one to see him. It was a matter of pride. A gunslinger knows pride—that invisible bone that keeps the neck stiff.

He stopped and looked up suddenly. It made his head buzz and for a moment his whole body seemed to float The mountains dreamed against the far horizon. But there was something else up ahead, something much closer. Perhaps only five miles away. He squinted at it, but his eyes were sandblasted and going glare blind. He shook his head and began to walk again. The rhyme circled and buzzed. About an hour later he fell down and skinned his hands. He looked at the tiny beads of blood on his flaked skin with disbelief. The blood looked no thinner; it looked mutely viable. It seemed almost as smug as the desert He dashed the drops away, haling them blindly. Smug? Why not? The blood was

not thirsty. The blood was being served. The blood was being made sacrifice unto. Blood sacrifice. All the blood needed to do was run... and run.., and run.

He looked at the splotches that had landed on the hard-pan and watched as they were sucked up with uncanny suddenness. How do you like that, blood? How does that grab you?

O Jesus, you're far gone.

He got up, holding his hands to his chest and the thing he had seen earlier was almost in front of him, startling a cry out of him — a dust-choked crow-croak. It was a building. No; two buildings, surrounded by a fallen rail fence. The wood seemed old, fragile to the point of elvishness; it was wood being transmogrified into sand. One of the buildings had been a stable — the shape was clear and unmistakable. The other was a house, or an inn. A way station for the coach line. The tottering sand-house (the wind had crusted the wood with grit until it looked like a sand castle that the sun had beat upon at low tide and hardened to a temporary abode) cast a thin line of shadow, and someone sat in the shadow, leaning against the building. And the building seemed to lean with the burden of his weight

Him, then. At last The man in black.

The gunslinger stood with his hands to his chest, unaware of his declamatory posture, and gawped. And instead of the tremendous winging excitement he had expected (or perhaps fear, or awe), there was nothing but the dim, atavistic guilt for the sudden, raging hate of his own blood moments earlier and the endless ring-a-rosy of the childhood song:

... the rain in Spain...

He moved forward, drawing one gun.

... falls mainly on the plain.

He came the last quarter mile at the run, not trying to hide himself; there was nothing to hide behind. His short shadow raced him. He was not aware that his face had become a gray and grinning death mask of exhaustion; he was aware of nothing but the figure in the shadow. It did not occur to him until later that the figure might even have been dead.

He kicked through one of the leaning fence rails (it broke in two without a sound, almost apologetically) and lunged across the dazzled and silent stable yard, bringing the gun up.

"You're covered! You're covered! You're —"

The figure moved restlessly and stood up. The gunslinger thought: My God, he is worn away to

nothing, what's happened to him? Because the man in black had shrunk two full feet and his hair had gone white.

He paused, struck dumb, his head buzzing tunelessly. His heart was racing at a lunatic rate and he thought, I'm dying right here -He sucked the white-hot air into his lungs and hung his head for a moment When he raised it again, he saw it wasn't the man in black but a small boy with sun-bleached hair, regarding him with eyes that did not even seem interested. The gunslinger stared at him blankly and then shook his head in negation. But the boy survived his refusal to believe; he was still there, wearing blue jeans with a patch on one knee and a plain brown shirt of rough weave.

The gunslinger shook his head again and started for the stable with his head lowered, gun still in hand. He couldn't think yet His head was filled with motes and there was a huge, thrumming ache building in it

The inside of the stable was silent and dark and exploding with heat The gunslinger stared around himself with huge, floating walleyes. He made a drunken about-face and saw the boy standing in the ruined doorway, staring at him. A huge lancet of pain slipped dreamily into his head, cutting from temple to temple, dividing his brain like an orange. He reholstered his gun, swayed, put out his hands as if to ward off phantoms, and fell over on his face.

When he woke up, he was on his back, and there was a pile of light, odorless hay beneath his head. The boy had not been able to move him, but he had made him reasonably comfortable. And he was cool. He looked down at himself and saw that his shirt was dark with moisture. He licked at his face and tasted water. He blinked at it

The boy was hunkered down beside him. When he saw the gunslinger's eyes were open, he reached behind him and gave the gunslinger a dented tin can filled with water. He grasped it with trembling hands and allowed himself to drink a little - just a little. When that was down and sitting in his belly, he drank a little more. Then he spilled the rest over his face and made shocked blowing noises. The boy's pretty lips curved in a solemn little smile.

"Want something to eat?"

"Not yet," the gunslinger said. There was still a sick ache in his head from the sunstroke, and the water sat uneasily in his stomach, as if it did not know where to go. "Who are you?"

"My name is John Chambers. You can call me Jake."

The gunslinger sat up, and the sick ache became hard and immediate. He leaned forward and lost a brief struggle with his stomach.

"There's more," Jake said. He took the can and walked toward the rear of the stable. He paused and smiled back at the gunslinger uncertainly. The gunslinger nodded at him and then put his head down and propped it with his

hands. The boy was well-made, handsome, perhaps nine. There had been a shadow on his face, but there were shadows on all faces now.

A strange, thumping hum began at the rear of the stable, and the gunslinger raised his head alertly, hands going to gunbutts. The sound lasted for perhaps fifteen seconds and then quit. The boy came back with the can - filled now.

The gunslinger drank sparingly again, and this time it was a little better. The ache in his head was fading.

"I didn't know what to do with you when you fell down," Jake said. "For a couple of seconds there, I thought you were going to shoot me."

"I thought you were somebody else."

"The priest?"

The gunslinger looked up sharply. "What priest?"

The boy looked at him, frowning lightly. "The priest He camped in the yard. I was in the house over there. I didn't like him, so I didn't come out He came in the night and went on the next day. I would have hidden from you, but I was sleepin' when you came." He looked darkly over the gunslinger's head. "I don't like people. They fuck me up."

"What did the priest look like?"

The boy shrugged. "Like a priest. He was wearing black things."

"Like a hood and a cassock?"

"What's a cassock?"

"A robe."

The boy nodded. "A robe and a hood."

The gunslinger leaned forward, and something in his face made the boy recoil a little. "How long ago?"

"I - I - "

Patiently, the gunslinger said, "I'm not going to hurt you."

"I don't know. I can't remember time. Every day is the same."

For the first time the gunslinger wondered consciously how the boy had come to this place, with dry and man killing leagues of desert all around it. But he would not make it his concern; not yet, at least. "Make a guess. Long ago?"

"No. Not long. I haven't been here long."

The fire lit in him again. He grabbed the can and drank from it with hands that trembled the smallest bit. A snatch of the cradle song recurred, but this time, instead of his mother's face, he saw the scarred face of Alice, who had been his woman in the now-defunct town of Tull. "How long? A week? Two? three?"

The boy looked at him distractedly. "Yes."

"Which one?"

"A week. Or two. I didn't come out. He didn't even drink. I thought he might be the ghost of a priest I was scared. I've been scared almost all the time." His face quivered like crystal on the edge of the ultimate, destructive high note. "He didn't even build a fire. He just sat there. I don't even know if he went to sleep."

Close! He was closer than he had ever been. In spite of his extreme dehydration, his hands felt faintly moist; greasy.

"There's some dried meat," the boy said.

"All right" The gunslinger nodded. "Good."

The boy got up to fetch it, his knees popping slightly. He made a fine straight figure. The desert had not yet sapped him. His arms were thin, but the skin, although tanned, had not dried and cracked. He's got juice, the gunslinger thought He drank from the can again. He's got juice and he didn't come from this place.

Jake came back with a pile of dried jerky on what looked like a sun-scoured breadboard. The meat was tough, stringy, and salty enough to make the cankered lining of the gunslinger's mouth sing. He ate and drank until he felt logy, and then settled back. The boy ate only a little.

The gunslinger regarded him steadily, and the boy looked back at him. "Where did you come from, Jake?" He asked finally.

"I don't know." The boy frowned. "I did know. I knew when I came here, but it's all fuzzy now, like a bad dream when you wake up. I have lots of bad dreams."

"Did somebody bring you?"

"No," the boy said. "I was just here."

"You're not making any sense," the gunslinger said flatly.

Quite suddenly the boy seemed on the verge of tears. "I can't help it. I was just here. And now you'll go away and I'll starve because you ate up almost all my food. I didn't ask to be here. I don't like it. It's spooky."

"Don't feel so sorry for yourself. Make do."

"I didn't ask to be here," the boy repeated bewildered defiance.

The gunslinger ate another piece of the meat, chewing the salt out of it before swallowing. The boy had become part of it, and the gunslinger was convinced he told the truth—he had not asked for it. It was too bad. He himself ... he had asked for it But he had not asked for the game to become this dirty. He had not asked to be allowed to turn his guns on the unarmed populace of Tull; had not asked to shoot Allie, her face marked by that strange, shining scar; had not asked to be faced with a choice between the obsession of his duty and his quest and criminal amorality. The man in black had begun to pull bad strings in his desperation, if it was the man in black who had pulled this particular string. It was not fair to ring in innocent bystanders and make them speak lines they didn't understand on a strange stage. Allie, he thought Allie at least had been into the world in her own self-illusory way. But this boy... this God-damned boy....

"Tell me what you can remember," he told Jake.

"It's only a little. It doesn't seem to make any sense any more."

"Tell me. Maybe I can pick up the sense."

"There was a place... the one before this one. A high place with lots of rooms and a patio where you could look at tall buildings and water. There was a statue that stood in the water."

"A statue in the water?"

"Yes. A lady with a crown and a torch."

"Are you making this up?"

"I guess I must be," the boy said hopelessly. "There were things to ride in on the streets. Big ones and little ones. Yellow ones. A lot of yellow ones. I walked to school. There were cement

paths beside the streets. Windows to look in and more statues wearing clothes. The statues sold the clothes. I know it sounds crazy, but the statues sold the clothes."

The gunslinger shook his head and looked for a lie on the boy's face. He saw none.

"I walked to school," the boy repeated fixedly. "And I had a - "His eyes tilted closed and his lips moved gropingly." - a brown... book... bag. I carried a lunch. And I wore - "the groping again, agonized groping" - a tie."

"A what?"

"I don't know." The boy's fingers made a slow, unconscious clinching motion at his throat - a gesture the gun-

slinger associated with hanging. "I don't know. It's just all gone." And he looked away.

"May I put you to sleep?" The gunslinger asked. "I'm not sleepy."

"I can make you sleepy, and I can make you remember."

Doubtfully, Jake asked, "How could you do that?"

"With this."

The gunslinger removed one of the shells from his gunbelt and twirled it in his fingers. The movement was dexterous, as flowing as oil. The shell cartwheeled effortlessly from thumb and index and index and second, to second and ring, to ring and pinky. It popped out of sight and reappeared; seemed to float briefly, and then reversed. The shell walked across the gunslinger's fingers. The fingers themselves moved like a beaded curtain in a breeze. The boy watched, his initial doubt replaced with plain delight, then by raptness, then by a dawning mute blankness. The eyes slipped shut. The shell danced back and forth. Jake's eyes opened again, caught the steady, limpid dance between the gunslinger's fingers for a while longer, and then his eyes closed once more. The gunslinger continued, but Jake's eyes did not open again. The boy breathed with steady, bovine calmness. Was this part of it? Yes. There was a certain beauty, a logic, like the lacy frettings that fringe hard blue ice-packs. He seemed to hear the sound of wind-chimes. Not for the first time the gunslinger tasted the smooth, loden taste of soul-sickness. The shell in his fingers, manipulated with such unknown grace, was suddenly undead, horrific, the spoor of a monster. He dropped it into his palm and closed it into a fist with painful force. There were such things as rape in the world. Rape and murder and unspeakable practices, and all of them were for the good, the bloody good, for the myth, for the grail, for the Tower. Ah, the Tower stood somewhere, rearing its black bulk to the sky, and in his desert-scoured ears, the gunslinger heard the faint sweet sound of wind-chimes.

"Where are you?" he asked.

Jake Chambers is going downstairs with his book bag. There is Earth Science, there is Economic Geography, there is a notepad, a pencil, a lunch his mother's cook, Mrs. Greta Shaw, has made for him in the chrome-and-formica kitchen where a fan whirrs eternally, sucking up alien odors. In his lunch sack he has a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a bologna, lettuce, and onion sandwich, and four Oreo cookies. His parents do not hate him, but they seem to have overlooked him. They have abdicated and left him to Mrs. Greta Shaw, to nannies, to a tutor in the summer and The School (which is Private and Nice, and most of all, White) the rest of the time. None of these people have ever pretended to be more than what they are - professional people, the best in their fields. None have folded him to a particularly warm bosom as usually happens in the historical novels his mother reads and which fake has dipped into, looking for the "hot parts." "Hysterical novels, his fat her sometimes calls them, and sometimes, "bodice-rippers." You should talk, his mother says with infinite scorn from behind some closed door where Jake listens. His father works for The Network, and Jake could pick him out of a line-up. Probably.

Jake does not know that he hates all the professional people, but he does. People have always bewildered him. He likes stairs and will not use the self-service elevator in his building. His mother, who is scrawny in a sexy way, often goes to bed with sick friends.

Now he is on the street, Jake Chambers is on the street, he has "Hit the bricks." He is clean and well-mannered, comely, sensitive. He has no friends; only acquaintances. He has never bothered to think about this, but it hurts him. He does not know or understand that a long association with professional people has caused him to take many of their traits. Mrs. Greta Shaw makes hands folded in his lap, still breathing calmly. He had told his tale without much emotion, although his voice had trembled near the end, when he had come to the part about the "priest" and the "Act of Contrition." He had not, of course, told the gunslinger about his family and his own sense of bewildered dichotomy, but that had seeped through anyway - enough had seeped through to make out its shape. The fact that there had never been such a city as the boy described (or, if so, it had only existed in the myth of prehistory) was not the most upsetting part of the story,

but it was disturbing. It was all disturbing. The gunslinger was afraid of the implications.  
"Jake?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Do you want to remember this when you wake up, or forget it?"

"Forget it," the boy said promptly. "I bled."

"All right You're going to sleep, understand? Go ahead and lie over."

Jake laid over, looking small and peaceful and harm less. The gunslinger did not believe he was harmless. There was a deadly feeling about him, and the stink of pre destination. He didn't like the feeling, but he liked the boy. He liked him a great deal.

"Jake?"

"Shhh. I want to sleep."

"Yes. And when you wake up you won't remember any of this."

"Kay."

The gunslinger watched him for a brief time, thinking of own boyhood, which usually seemed to have happened to another person - to a person who had jumped through some osmotic lens and become someone else -but which now seemed poignantly close. It was very hot in the stable of the way station, and he carefully drank some

more water. He got up and walked to the back of the building, pausing to look into one of the horse stalls. There was a small pile of white hay in the corner, and a neatly folded blanket, but there was no smell of horse. There was no smell of anything in the stable. The sun had bled away every smell and left nothing. The air was perfectly neutral.

At the back of the stable was a small, dark room with a stainless steel machine in the center. It was untouched by rust or rot. It looked like a butter churn. At the left, a chrome pipe jutted from it, terminating over a drain in the floor. The gunslinger had seen pumps like it in other dry places, but never one so big. He could not contemplate how deep they must have drilled before they struck water, secret and forever black under the desert

Why hadn't they removed the pump when the way station had been abandoned?

Demons, perhaps.

He shuddered abruptly, an abrupt twisting of his back. Heatflesh poked out on his skin, then receded. He went to the control switch and pushed the ON button. The machine began to hum. After perhaps half a minute, a stream of cool, clear water belched from the pipe and went down the drain to be recirculated. Perhaps three gallons flowed out of the pipe before the pump shut itself down with a final click. It was a thing as alien to this place and time as true love, and yet as concrete as a Judgment, a silent reminder of the time when the world had not yet moved on. It probably ran on an atomic slug, as there was no electricity within a thousand miles of here and even dry batteries would have lost their charge long ago. The gunslinger didn't like it

He went back and sat down beside the boy, who had put one hand under his cheek. Nice-looking boy. The gunslinger drank some more water and crossed his legs so he was sitting Indian fashion. The boy, like the squatter on the edge of the desert who kept the bird (Zoltan, the gunslinger remembered abruptly, the bird's name was Zoltan), had lost his sense of time, but the fact that the man in black was closer seemed beyond doubt Not for the first time, the gunslinger wondered if the man in black was letting him catch up for some reason of his own. Perhaps the gunslinger was playing into his hands. He tried to imagine what the confrontation might be like, and could not He was very hot, but he no longer felt sick. The nursery rhyme occurred to him again, but this time instead of his mother, he thought of Cort - Cort, with his face hem-stitched with the scars of bricks and bullets and blunt instruments. The scars of war. He wondered if Cort had ever had a love to match those monumental scars. He doubted it He thought of Aileen, and of Marten, that incomplete enchanter.

The gunslinger was not a man to dwell on the past; only a shadowy conception of the future and of his own emotional make-up saved him from being a creature without imagination, a dullard. His present run of thought therefore rather amazed him. Each name called up others - Cuthbert, Paul, the old man Jonas; and Susan, the lovely girl at the window.

The piano player in Tull (also dead, all dead in Tull, and by his hand) had been fond of the old songs, and the gunslinger hummed one tunelessly under his breath:

Love o love o careless love

See what careless love has done.

The gunslinger laughed, bemused. Jam the last of that green and warm-hued world. And for all his nostalgia, he felt no self-pity. The world had moved on mercilessly, but his legs were still strong, and the man in black was closer. The gunslinger nodded out

When he woke up it was almost dark and the boy was gone. The gunslinger got up, hearing his joints

pop, and went

to the stable door. There was a small flame dancing in darkness on the porch of the inn. He walked toward it, his shadow long and black and trailing in the ochre light of the sunset.

Jake was sitting by a kerosene lamp. "The oil was in a drum," he said, "but I was scared to burn it in the house. Everything's so dry -"

"You did just right." The gunslinger sat down, seeing but not thinking about the dust of years that puffed up around his rump. The flame from the lamp shadowed the boy's face with delicate tones. The gunslinger produced his poke and rolled a cigarette.

"We have to talk," he said.

Jake nodded.

"I guess you know I'm on the prod for that man you saw."

"Are you going to kill him?"

"I don't know. I have to make him tell me something. I may have to make him take me someplace."

"Where?"

"To find a tower," the gunslinger said. He held his cigarette over the chimney of the lamp and drew on it; the smoke drifted away on the rising night breeze. Jake watched it. His face showed neither fear nor curiosity, certainly not enthusiasm.

"So I'm going on tomorrow," the gunslinger said. "You'll have to come with me. How much of that meat is left?"

"Only a handful."

"Corn?"

"A little."

The gunslinger nodded. "Is there a cellar?"

"Yes." Jake looked at him. The pupils of his eyes had grown to a huge, fragile size. "You pull up on a ring in the floor, but I didn't go down. I was afraid the ladder would break and I wouldn't be able to get up again. And it smells bad. It's the only thing around here that smells at all."

"We'll get up early and see if there's anything down there worth taking. Then we'll bug out"

"All right" The boy paused and then said, "I'm glad I didn't kill you when you were sleeping. I had a pitchfork and I thought about doing it. But I didn't, and now I won't have to be afraid to go to sleep."

"What would you be afraid of?"

The boy looked at him ominously. "Spooks. Of him coming back."

"The man in black," the gunslinger said. Not a question.

"Yes. Is he a bad man?"

"That depends on where you're standing," the gunslinger said absently. He got up and pitched his cigarette out onto the hardpan. "I'm going to sleep."

The boy looked at him timidly. "Can I sleep in the stable with you?"

"Of course."

The gunslinger stood on the steps, looking up, and the boy joined him. Polaris was up there, and Mars. It seemed to the gunslinger that, if he closed his eyes he would be able to hear the croaking of the first spring peepers, smell the green and almost-summer smell of the court lawns after their first cutting (and hear, perhaps, the indolent click of croquet balls as the ladies of the East Wing, attired only in their shifts as dusk glimmered toward dark, played at Points), could almost see Aileen as she came through the break in the hedges -It was not like him to think so much of the past.

He turned back and picked up the lamp. "Let's go to sleep," he said.

They crossed to the stable together.

The next morning he explored the cellar.

Jake was right; it smelled bad. It had a wet, swampy smell that made the gunslinger feel nauseous and a little lightheaded after the antiseptic odorlessness of the desert and the stable. The cellar smelled of cabbages and turnips and potatoes with long, sightless eyes gone to everlasting rot. The ladder, however, seemed quite sturdy, and he climbed down.

The floor was earthen, and his head almost touched the overhead beams. Down here spiders still lived, disturbingly big ones with mottled gray bodies. Many of them had mutated. Some had eyes on stalks, some had what might have been as many as sixteen legs.

The gunslinger peered around and waited for his nighteyes.

"You all right?" Jake called down nervously.

"Yes. He focused on the corner. "There are cans. Wait"

He went carefully to the corner, ducking his head. There was an old box with one side folded down.



The cans were vegetables – green beans, yellow beans... and three cans of corned beef. He scooped up an armload and went back to the ladder. He climbed halfway up and handed them to Jake, who knelt to receive them. He went back for more.

It was on the third trip that he heard the groaning in the foundations.

He turned, looked, and felt a kind of dreamy terror wash over him, a feeling both languid and repellent, like sex in the water – one drowning within another.

The foundation was composed of huge sandstone blocks that had probably been evenly cornered when the way station was new, but which were now at every zigzag, drunken angle. It made the wall look as if it were inscribed with strange, meandering hieroglyphics. And from the joining of two of these abstruse cracks, a thin spill of sand was running, as if something on the other side was digging

itself through with slobbering, agonized intensity.

The groaning rose and fell, becoming louder, until the whole cellar was full of the sound, an abstract noise of ripping pain and dreadful effort.

"Come up!" Jake screamed. "O Jesus, mister, come up!"

"Go away," the gunslinger said calmly.

"Come up!" Jake screamed again.

The gunslinger did not answer. He pulled leather with his right hand.

There was a hole in the wall now, a hole as big as a coin. He could hear, through the curtain of his own terror, Jake's pattering feet as the boy ran. Then the spill of sand stopped. The groaning ceased, but there was a sound of steady, labored breathing.

"Who are you?" The gunslinger asked.

No answer.

And in the High Speech, his voice filling with the old thunder of command, Roland demanded: "Who are you, Demon? Speak, if you would speak. My time is short; my hands lose patience."

"Go slow," a dragging, clotted voice said from within the wall. And the gunslinger felt the dreamlike terror deepen and grow almost solid. It was the voice of Alice, the woman he had stayed with in the town of Tull. But she was dead; he had seen her go down himself, a bullet hole between her eyes. Fathoms seemed to swim by his eyes, descending. "Go slow past the Drawers, gunslinger. While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket."

"What do you mean? Speak on!"

But the breathing was gone.

The gunslinger stood for a moment, frozen, and then one of the huge spiders dropped on his arm and scrambled frantically up to his shoulder. With an involuntary grunt he brushed it away and got his feet moving. He did not want

To do it, but custom was strict, inviolable. The dead from the dead, as the old proverb has it; only a corpse may speak. He went to the hole and punched at it. The sandstone crumbled easily at the edges, and with a bare stiffening of muscles, he thrust his hand through the wall.

And touched something solid, with raised and fretted knobs. He drew it out. He held a jawbone, rotted at the far hinge. The teeth leaned this way and that.

"All right," he said softly. He thrust it rudely into his back pocket and went back up the ladder, carrying the last cans awkwardly. He left the trapdoor open. The sun would get in and kill the spiders.

Jake was halfway across the stable yard, cowering on the cracked, rubbly hardpan. He screamed when he saw the gunslinger, backed away a step or two, and then ran to him, crying.

"I thought it got you, that it got you, I thought –"

"It didn't." He held the boy to him, feeling his face, hot against his chest, and his hands, dry against his ribcage. It occurred to him later that this was when he began to love the boy – which was, of course, what the man in black must have planned all along.

"Was it a demon?" The voice was muffled.

"Yes. A speaking-demon. We don't have to go back there anymore. Come on."

They went to the stable, and the gunslinger made a rough pack from the blanket he had slept under – it was hot and prickly, but there was nothing else. That done, he filled the waterbags from the pump.

"You carry one of the waterbags," the gunslinger said. "Wear it around your shoulders – like a fakir carries his snake. See?"

"Yes." The boy looked up at him worshipfully. He slung one of the bags.

"Is it too heavy?"

"No. It's fine."

"Tell me the truth, now. I can't carry you if you get a sunstroke."

"I won't have a sunstroke. I'll be okay."

The gunslinger nodded.

"We're going to the mountains, aren't we?"

"Yes."

They walked out into the steady smash of the sun. Jake, his head as high as the swing of the gunslinger's elbows, walked to his right and a little ahead, the rawhide-wrapped ends of the waterbag hanging nearly to his shins. The gunslinger had crisscrossed two more waterbags across his shoulders and carried the sling of food in his armpit, his left arm holding it against his body.

They passed through the far gate of the way station and found the blurred ruts of the stage track again. They had walked perhaps fifteen minutes when Jake turned around and waved at the two buildings. They seemed to huddle in the titanic space of the desert.

"Goodbye!" Jake cried. "Goodbye!"

They walked. The stage track breasted a frozen sand drumlin, and when the gunslinger looked around, the way station was gone. Once again there was the desert, and that only.

They were three days out of the way station; the mountains were deceptively clear now. They could see the rise of the desert into foothills, the first naked slopes, the bedrock bursting through the skin of the earth in sullen, eroded triumph. Further up, the land gentled off briefly again, and for the first time in months or years the gunslinger could see green – real, living green. Grass, dwarf spruces, perhaps even willows, all fed by snow runoff from further up.

Beyond that the rock took over again, rising in cyclopean, tumbled splendor to the blinding snowcaps. Off to the left, a huge slash showed the way to the smaller, eroded sandstone cliffs and mesas and buttes on the far side. This draw was obscured in the almost continual gray membrane of showers. At night, Jake would sit fascinated for the few minutes before he fell into sleep, watching the brilliant swordplay of the far-off lightning, white and purple, startling in the clarity of the night air.

The boy was fine on the trail. He was tough, but more than that, he seemed to fight exhaustion with a calm and professional reservoir of will which the gunslinger fully appreciated. He did not talk much and he did not ask questions, not even about the jawbone, which the gunslinger turned over and over in his hands during his evening smoke. He caught a sense that the boy felt highly flattered by the gunslinger's companionship – perhaps even exalted by it – and this disturbed him. The boy had been placed in his path – While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket – and the fact that Jake was not slowing him down only opened the way to more sinister possibilities.

They passed the symmetrical campfire leavings of the man in black at regular intervals, and it seemed to the gunslinger that these leavings were much fresher now. On the third night, the gunslinger was sure that he could see the distant spark of another campfire, somewhere in the first rising swell of the foothills.

Near two o'clock on the fourth day out from the way station, Jake reeled and almost fell.

"Here, sit down," the gunslinger said.

"No, I'm okay."

"Sit down."

The boy sat obediently. The gunslinger squatted close by, so Jake would be in his shadow.

"Drink."

"I'm not supposed to until – "

"Drink."

The boy drank, three swallows. The gunslinger wet the tail of the blanket, which was lighter now, and applied the damp fabric to the boy's wrists and forehead, which were fever-dry.

"From now on we rest every afternoon at this time. Fifteen minutes. Do you want to sleep?"

"No." The boy looked at him with shame. The gunslinger looked back blandly. In an abstracted way he withdrew one of the bullets from his belt and began to twirl it between his fingers. The boy watched, fascinated.

"That's neat," he said.

The gunslinger nodded. "Sure it is." he paused. "When I was your age, I lived in a walled city, did I tell you that?"

The boy shook his head sleepily.

"Sure. And there was an evil man – "

"The priest?"

"No," the gunslinger said, "but the two of them had some relationship, I think now. Maybe even half-brothers. Marten was a wizard... like Merlin. Do they tell of Merlin where you come from, Jake?"

"Merlin and Arthur and the knights of the round table," Jake said dreamily. The gunslinger felt a nasty jolt go through him. "Yes," he said. "I was very young, ..." But the boy was asleep sitting up, his hands folded neatly in his lap. "When I snap my fingers, you'll wake up. You'll be rested and fresh. Do you understand?" "Yes."

"Lay over, then."

The gunslinger got makings from his poke and rolled a cigarette. There was something missing. He searched for it in his diligent, careful way and located it. The missing thing was that maddening sense of hurry, the feeling that he might be left behind at any time, that the trail would die out and he would be left with only a broken piece of string. All that was gone now, and the gunslinger was slowly becoming sure that the man in black wanted to be caught.

What would follow?

The question was too vague to catch his interest. Cuthbert would have found interest in it, lively interest, but Cuthbert was gone, and the gunslinger could only go forward in the way he knew. He watched the boy as he smoked, and his mind turned back on Cuthbert, who had always laughed – to his death he had gone laughing – and Cort, who never laughed, and on Marten, who sometimes smiled – a thin, silent smile that had its own disquieting gleam... like an eye that slips open in the dark and discloses blood. And there had been the falcon, of course. The falcon was named David, after the legend of the boy with the sling. David, he was quite sure, knew nothing but the need for murder, rending, and terror. Like the gunslinger himself. David was no dilettante; he played the center of the court.

Perhaps, though, in some final accounting, David the falcon had been closer to Marten than to anyone else... and perhaps his mother, Gabrielle, had known it.

The gunslinger's stomach seemed to rise painfully against his heart, but his face didn't change. He watched the smoke of his cigarette rise into the hot desert air and disappear, and his mind went back.

II

The sky was white, perfectly white, and the smell of rain was in the air. The smell of hedges and growing green was strong and sweet. It was deep spring.

David sat on Cuthbert's arm, a small engine of destruction with bright golden eyes that glared outward at nothing. The rawhide leash attached to his jesses was looped carelessly about Cuthbert's arm.

Cort stood aside from the two boys, a silent figure in patched leather trousers and a green cotton shirt that had been cinched high with his old, wide infantry belt. The green of his shirt merged with the hedges and the rolling turf of the Back Courts, where the ladies had not yet begun to play at Points.

"Get ready," Roland whispered to Cuthbert.

"We're ready," Cuthbert said confidently. "Aren't we, Davey?"

They spoke the low speech, the language of both scullions and squires; the day when they would be allowed to use their own tongue in the presence of others was still far. "It's a beautiful day for it. Can you smell the rain? It's –"

Cort abruptly raised the trap in his hands and let the side fall open. The dove was out and up, trying for the sky in a quick, fluttering blast of its wings. Cuthbert pulled the leash, but he was slow; the hawk was already up and his takeoff was awkward. With a brief twitch of its wings the hawk had recovered. It struck upward, gaining altitude over the dove, moving bullet-swift. Cort walked over to where the boys stood, casually, and swung his huge and twisted fist at Cuthbert's ear. The boy fell over without a sound, although his lips writhed back from his gums. A trickle of blood flowed slowly from his ear and onto the rich green grass.

"You were slow," he said.

Cuthbert was struggling to his feet. "I'm sorry, Cort. It's just that I –Cort swung again, and Cuthbert fell over again. The blood flowed more swiftly now.

"Speak the High Speech," he said softly. His voice was flat. with a slight, drunken rasp. "Speak your act of contrition in the speech of civilization for which better men than you will ever be have died, maggot."

Cuthbert was getting up again. Tears stood brightly in his eyes, but his lips were pressed tightly together in a bright line of hate which did not quiver.

"I grieve," Cuthbert said in a voice of breathless control. "I have forgotten the face of my father, whose guns I hope someday to bear."

"That's right, brat," Cort said. "You'll consider what you did wrong, and bookend your reflections with hunger. No supper. No breakfast."

"Look!" Roland cried. He pointed up.

The hawk had climbed above the soaring dove. It glided for a moment, its stubby, muscular wings outstretched and without movement on the still, white spring air. Then it folded its wings and dropped like a stone. The two bodies came together, and for a moment Roland fancied he could see blood in the air... but it might have been his imagination. The hawk gave a brief scream of triumph. The dove fluttered, twisting, to the ground, and Roland ran toward the kill, leaving Cort and the chastened Cuthbert behind him.

The hawk had landed beside its prey and was complacently tearing into its plump white breast. A few feathers seesawed slowly downward.

"David!" The boy yelled, and tossed the hawk a piece of rabbit flesh from his poke. The hawk caught it on the fly, ingested it with an upward shaking of its back and throat, and Roland attempted to re-lease the bird.

The hawk whirled, almost absentmindedly, and ripped skin from Roland's arm in a long, dangling gash. Then it went back to its meal.

With a grunt, Roland looped the leash again, this time catching David's diving, slashing beak on the leather gauntlet he wore. He gave the hawk another piece of meat, then hooded it. Docilely, David climbed onto his wrist.

He stood up proudly, the hawk on his arm.

"What's this?" Cort asked, pointing to the dripping slash on Roland's forearm. The boy stationed himself to receive the blow, locking his throat against any possible cry, but no blow fell.

"He struck me," Roland said.

"You pissed him off," Cort said. "The hawk does not fear you, boy, and the hawk never will. The hawk is God's gunslinger."

Roland merely looked at Cort. He was not an imaginative boy, and if Cort had intended to imply a moral, it was lost on him; he was pragmatic enough to believe that it might have been one of the few foolish statements he had ever heard Cort make.

Cuthbert came up behind them and stuck his tongue out at Cort, safely on his blind side. Roland did not smile, but nodded to him.

"Go in now," Cort said, taking the hawk. He pointed at Cuthbert "But remember your reflection, maggot And your fast. Tonight and tomorrow morning."

"Yes," Cuthbert said, stiltedly formal now. "Thank you for this instructive day."

"You learn," Cort said, "but your tongue has a bad habit of lolling from your stupid mouth when your instructor's back is turned. Mayhap the day will come when it and you will learn their respective places." He struck Cuthbert again, this time solidly between the eyes and hard enough so that Roland heard a dull thud - the sound a mallet makes when a scullion taps a keg of beer. Cuthbert fell backward onto the lawn, his eyes cloudy and dazed at first. Then they cleared and he stared burningly up at Cort, his hatred unveiled, a pinprick as bright as the dove's blood in the center of each eye.

Cuthbert nodded and parted his lips in a scarifying smile that Roland had never seen.

"Then there's hope for you," Cort said. "When you think you can, you come for me, maggot."

"How did you know?" Cuthbert said between his teeth. Cort turned toward Roland so swiftly that Roland almost fell back a step - and then both of them would have been on the grass, decorating the new green with their blood. "I saw it reflected in this maggot's eyes," he said. "Remember it, Cuthbert. Last lesson for today."

Cuthbert nodded again, the same frightening smile on his face. "I grieve," he said. "I have forgotten the face -"

"Cut that shit," Cort said, losing interest. He turned to Roland. "Go on, now. The both of you. If I have to look at your stupid maggot faces any longer I'll puke my guts."

"Come on," Roland said.

Cuthbert shook his head to clear it and got to his feet Cort was already walking down the hill in his squat, bowlegged stride, looking powerful and somehow prehistoric. The shaved and grizzled spot at the top of his head loomed at a slant, hunched.

"I'll kill the son of a bitch," Cuthbert said, still smiling. A large goose egg, purple and knotted, was rising mystically on his forehead.

"Not you or me," Roland said, suddenly bursting into a grin. "You can have supper in the west kitchen with me. Cook will give us some."

"He'll tell Cort."

"He's no friend of Cort's." Roland said, and then shrugged. "And what if he did?"

Cuthbert grinned back. "Sure. Right. I always wanted to know how the world looked when your head was on backwards and upside down."

They started back together over the green lawns, casting shadows in the fine white spring light.

The cook in the west kitchen was named Hax. He stood huge in food stained whites, a man with a crude-oil complexion whose ancestry was a quarter black, a quarter yellow, a quarter from the South Islands, now almost forgotten (the world had moved on), and a quarter God knew what He shuffled about three high-ceilinged steamy rooms like a tractor in low gear, wearing huge, Caliph-like slippers. He was one of those quite rare adults who communicate with small children fairly well and who love them all impartially – not in a sugary way but in a businesslike fashion that may sometimes entail a hug, in the same way that closing a big business deal may call for a handshake. He even loved the boys who had begun The Training, although they were different from other children – not always demonstrative and somehow dangerous, not in an adult way, but rather as if they were ordinary children with a slight touch of madness – and Cuthbert was not the first of Cort's students whom he had fed on the sly. At this moment he stood in front of his huge, rambling electric stove

– one of six working appliances left on the whole estate. It was his personal domain, and he stood there watching the two boys bolt the gravied meat scraps he had produced. Behind, before, and all around, cookboys, scullions, and various underlings rushed through the foaming, humid air, rattling pans, stirring stew, slaving over potatoes and vegetables in nether regions. In the dimly lit pantry alcove, a washerwoman with a doughy, miserable face and hair caught up in a rag splashed water around on the floor with a mop.

One of the scullery boys rushed up with a man from the Guards in tow. "This man, he wantchoo, Hax."

"All right" Hax nodded to the Guard, and he nodded back. "You boys," he said. "Go over to Maggie, she'll give you some pie. Then scat"

They nodded and went over to Maggie, who gave them huge wedges of pie on dinner plates... but gingerly, as if they were wild dogs that might bite her.

"Let's eat it on the stairs," Cuthbert said.

"All right"

They sat behind a huge, sweating stone colonnade, out of sight of the kitchen, and gobbled their pie with their fingers. It was only moments later that they saw shadows fall on the far curving wall of the wide staircase. Roland grabbed Cuthbert's arm. "Come on," he said. "Someone's coming." Cuthbert looked up, his face surprised and berry-stained.

But the shadows stopped, still out of sight It was Hax and the man from the Guards. The boys sat where they were. If they moved now, they might be heard.

"... . the good man," the Guard was saying.

"In Farson?"

"In two weeks," the Guard replied. "Maybe three. You have to come with us. There's a shipment from the freight depot.... "A particularly loud crash of pots and pans and a volley of catcalls directed at the hapless potboy who had dropped them blotted out some of the rest; then the boys heard the Guard finish: "... . poisoned meat"

"Risky."

"Ask not what the good man can do for you – "the Guard began.

"– but what you can do for him," Hax sighed. "Soldier, ask not"

"You know what it could mean," the Guard said quietly.

"Yes. And I know my responsibilities to him; you don't need to lecture me. I love him just as you do."

"All right The meat will be marked for short-term storage in your coldrooms. But you'll have to be quick. You must understand that."

"There are children in Farson?" The cook asked sadly. It was not really a question.

"Children everywhere," the Guard said gently. "It's the children we – and he – care about."

"Poisoned meat. Such a strange way to care for children." Hax uttered a heavy, whistling sigh.

"Will they curdle and hold their bellies and cry for their mammas? I suppose they will."

"It will be like a going to sleep," the Guard said, but his voice was too confidently reasonable.

"Of course," Hax said, and laughed.

"You said it yourself. 'Soldier, ask not' Do you enjoy seeing children under the rule of the gun, when they could be under his hand who makes the lion lie down with the lamb?"

Hax did not reply.

"I go on duty in twenty minutes," the Guard said, his voice once more calm. "Give me a joint of mutton and I will pinch one of your girls and make her giggle. When I leave – "My mutton will

give no cramps to your belly, Robeson."

"Will you... "But the shadows moved away and the voices were lost.

I could have killed them, Roland thought, frozen and fascinated. I could have killed them both with my knife, slit their throats like hogs. He looked at his hands, now stained with gravy and berries as well as dirt from the day's lessons.

"Roland."

He looked at Cuthbert. They looked at each other for a long moment in the fragrant semidarkness, and a taste of warm despair rose in Roland's throat. What he felt might have been a sort of death – something as brutal and final as the death of the dove in the white sky over the games field. Hax? He thought, bewildered. Hax who put a poultice on my leg that time? Hax? And then his mind snapped closed, cutting the subject off.

What he saw, even in Cuthbert's humorous, intelligent face, was nothing – nothing at all. Cuthbert's eyes were flat with Hax's doom. In Cuthbert's eyes, it had already happened. He had fed them and they had gone to the stairs to eat and then Hax had brought the Guard named Robeson to the wrong corner of the kitchen for their treasonous little tete-a-tete. That was all. In Cuthbert's eyes Roland saw that Hax would die for his treason as a viper dies in a pit. That, and nothing else. Nothing at all.

They were gunslinger's eyes.

Roland's father was only just back from the uplands, and he looked out of place amid the drapes and the chiffon fripperies of the main receiving hall that the boy had only lately been granted access to, as a sign of his apprenticeship.

His father was dressed in black jeans and a blue work shirt. His cloak, dusty and streaked, torn to the lining in one place, was slung carelessly over his shoulder with no regard for the way it and he clashed with the elegance of the room. He was desperately thin and the heavy handlebar mustache below his nose seemed to weight his head as he looked down at his son. The guns crisscrossed over the wings of his hips hung at the perfect angle for his hands, the worn sandalwood handles looking dull and sleepy in this languid indoor light

"The head cook," his father said softly. "Imagine it! The tracks that were blown upland at the railhead. The dead stock in Hendrickson. And perhaps even.., imagine! Im agine!"

He looked more closely at his son.

"It preys on you."

"Like the hawk," Roland said. "It preys on you." He laughed – at the startling appropriateness of the image rather than at any lightness in the situation.

His father smiled.

"Yes," Roland said. "I guess it... it preys on me.

"Cuthbert was with you," his father said. "He will have told his father by now."

"Yes."

"He fed both of you when Cort – "

"Yes."

"And Cuthbert. Does it prey on him, do you think?"

"I don't know." Such an avenue of comparison did not really interest him. He was not concerned with how his feelings compared with those of others.

"It preys on you because you feel you've killed?"

Roland shrugged unwillingly, all at once not content with this probing of his motivations.

"Yet you told. Why?"

The boy's eyes widened. "How could I not? Treason was – "

His father waved a hand curtly. "If you did it for something as cheap as a schoolbook idea, you did it unworthily. I would rather see all of Farson poisoned."

"I didn't!" The words jerked out of him violently. "I wanted to kill him – both of them! Liars! Snakes! They –"Go ahead."

"They hurt me," he finished, defiant. "They did something to me. Changed something. I wanted to kill them for it."

His father nodded. "That is worthy. Not moral, but it is not your place to be moral. In fact... " He peered at his son. "Morals may always be beyond you. You are not quick, like Cuthbert or Wheeler's boy. It will make you formidable."

The boy, impatient before this, felt both pleased and troubled. "He will – "

"Hang."

The boy nodded. "I want to see it."

Roland the elder threw his head back and roared laughter. "Not as formidable as I thought... or perhaps just stupid." He closed his mouth abruptly. An arm shot out like a bolt of lightning and

grabbed the boy's upper arm painfully. He grimaced but did not flinch. His father peered at him steadily, and the boy looked back, although it was more difficult than hooding the hawk had been. "All right," he said, and turned abruptly to go.

"Father?"

"What?"

"Do you know who they were talking about? Do you know who the good man is?"

His father turned back and looked at him speculatively. "Yes. I think I do."

"If you caught him," Roland said in his thoughtful, near-plodding way, "no one else like Cook would have to . . . have to be neck-popped."

His father smiled thinly. "Perhaps not for a while. But in the end, someone always has to have his or her neck popped, as you so quaintly put it. The people demand it. Sooner or later, if there isn't a turncoat, the people make one."

"Yes," Roland said, grasping the concept instantly - it was one he never forgot. "But if you got him - "

"No," his father said flatly.

"Why?"

For a moment his father seemed on the verge of saying why, but he bit it back. "We've talked enough for now, I think. Go out from me. "

He wanted to tell his father not to forget his promise when the time came for Hax to step through the trap, but he was sensitive to his father's moods. He suspected his father wanted to fuck. He closed that door quickly. He was aware that his mother and father did that . . . that thing together, and he was reasonably well informed as to what that act was, but the mental picture that always condensed with the thought made him feel both uneasy and oddly guilty. Some years later, Susan would tell him the story of Oedipus, and he would absorb it in quiet thoughtfulness, thinking of the odd and bloody triangle formed by his father, his mother, and by Marten - known in some quarters as the good man. Or perhaps it was a quadrangle, if one wished to add himself.

"Good night, father," Roland said.

"Good night, son," his father said absently, and began unbuttoning his shirt. In his mind, the boy was already gone. Like father, like son.

Gallows Hill was on the Farson Road, which was nicely poetic - Cuthbert might have appreciated this, but Roland did not. He did appreciate the splendidly ominous scaffold which climbed into the brilliantly blue sky, a black and angular silhouette which overhung the coach road.

The two boys had been let out of Morning Exercises - Cort had read the notes from their fathers laboriously, lips moving, nodding here and there. When he finished with them both, he had looked up at the blue-violet dawn sky and had nodded again.

"Wait here," he said, and went toward the leaning stone hut that was his living quarters. He came back with a slice of rough, unleavened bread, broke it in two, and gave half to each.

"When it's over, each of you will put this beneath his shoes. Mind you do exactly as I say, or I'll clout you into next week."

They had not understood until they arrived, riding double on Cuthbert's gelding. They were the first, fully two hours ahead of anyone else and four hours before the hanging, and Gallows Hill stood deserted - except for the rooks and ravens. The birds were everywhere, and of course they were all black. They roosted noisily on the hard, jutting bar that overhung the trap - the armature of death. They sat in a row along the edge of the platform, they jostled for position on the stairs.

"They leave them," Cuthbert muttered. "For the birds."

"Let's go up," Roland said.

Cuthbert looked at him with something like horror. "Do you think - "

Roland cut him off with a gesture of his hands. "We're years early. No one will come."

"All right."

They walked slowly toward the gibbet, and the birds took indignant wing, cawing and circling like a mob of angry dispossessed peasants. Their bodies were flat and black against the pure dawnlight of the sky.

For the first time Roland felt the enormity of his responsibility in the matter; this wood was not noble, not part of the awesome machine of Civilization, but merely warped pine covered with splattered white bird droppings. It was splashed everywhere - stairs, railing, platform - and it stank.

The boy turned to Cuthbert with startled, terrified eyes and saw Cuthbert looking back at him with the same expression.

"I can't," Cuthbert whispered. "I can't watch it."

Roland shook his head slowly. There was a lesson here, he realized, not a shining thing but something that was old and rusty and misshapen. It was why their fathers had let them come. And with his usual stubborn and inarticulate doggedness, Roland laid mental hands on whatever it was. "You can, Bert."

"I won't sleep tonight"

"Then you won't," Roland said, not seeing what that had to do with it

Cuthbert suddenly seized Roland's hand and looked at him with such mute agony that Roland's own doubt came back, and he wished sickly that they had never gone to the west kitchen that night His father had been right Better every man, woman, and child in Farson than this.

But whatever the lesson was, rusty, half-buried thing, he would not let it go or give up his grip on it

"Let's not go up," Cuthbert said. "We've seen everything."

And Roland nodded reluctantly, feeling his grip on that thing – whatever it was – weaken. Cort, he knew, would have knocked them both sprawling and then forced them up to the platform step by cursing step . . . and sniffing fresh blood back up their noses as they went Cort would probably have looped new hemp over the yardarm itself and put the noose around each of their necks in turn, would have made them stand on the trap to feel it; and Cort would have been ready to strike them again if either wept or lost control of his bladder. And Cort, of course, would have been right For the first time in his life, Roland found himself hating his own childhood. He wished for the size and calluses and sureness of age.

He deliberately pried a splinter from the railing and placed it in his breast pocket before turning away.

"Why did you do that?" Cuthbert asked.

He wished to answer something swaggering: Oh, the luck of the gallows . . . but he only looked at Cuthbert and shook his head. "Just so I'll have it," he said. "Always have it"

They walked away from the gallows, sat down, and waited. In an hour or so the first of them began to gather, mostly families who had come in broken-down wagons and shays, carrying their breakfasts with them – hampers of cold pancakes folded over fillings of wild strawberry jam. Roland felt his stomach growl hungrily and wondered again, with despair, where the honor and the nobility of it was. It seemed to him that Hax in his dirty whites, walk-king around and around his steaming, subterranean kitchen, had more honor than this. He fingered the splinter from the gallows tree with sick bewilderment Cuthbert lay beside him with his face made impassive.

In the end it was not so much, and Roland was glad. Hax was carried in an open cart, but only his huge girth gave him away; he had been blindfolded with a wide black cloth that hung down over his face. A few threw stones, but most merely continued with their breakfasts.

A gunslinger whom the boy did not know (he was glad his father had not drawn the lot) led the fat cook carefully up the steps. Two Guards of the Watch had gone ahead and stood on either side of the trap. When Hax and the gunslinger reached the top, the gunslinger threw the noosed rope over the crosstree and then put it over the cook's head, dropping the knot until it lay just below the left ear. The birds had all flown, but Roland knew they were waiting.

"Do you wish to make confession?" the gunslinger asked.

"I have nothing to confess," Hax said. His words carried well, and his voice was oddly dignified in spite of the muffle of cloth which hung over his lips. The cloth ruffled slightly in the faint, pleasant breeze that had blown up. "I have not forgotten my father's face; it has been with me through all."

Roland glanced sharply at the crowd and was disturbed by what he saw there – a sense of sympathy? Perhaps admiration? He would ask his father. When traitors are called heroes (or heroes traitors, he supposed in his frowning way), dark times must have fallen. He wished he understood better. His mind flashed to Cort and the bread Cort had given them. He felt contempt; the day was coming when Cort would serve him. Perhaps not Cuthbert; perhaps Cuthbert would buckle under Cort's steady fire and remain a page or a horseboy (or infinitely worse, a perfumed diplomat, dallying in receiving chambers or looking into bogus crystal balls with doddering kings and princes), but he would not. He knew it.

"Roland?"

"I'm here." He took Cuthbert's hand, and their fingers locked together like iron.

The trap dropped. Hax plummeted through. And in the sudden stillness, there was a sound: that sound an exploding pineknot makes on the hearth during a cold winter night.

But it was not so much. The cook's legs kicked out once in a wide Y; the crowd made a satisfied whistling noise; the Guards of the Watch dropped their military pose and began to gather things up negligently. The gunslinger walked back down the steps slowly, mounted his



horse, and rode off, cutting roughly through one gaggle of picnickers, making them scurry. The crowd dispersed rapidly after that, and in forty minutes the two boys were left alone on the small hill they had chosen. The birds were returning to examine their new prize. One lit on Hax's shoulder and sat there chummily, darting its beak at the bright and shiny hoop Hax had always worn in his right ear.

"It doesn't look like him at all," Cuthbert said.

"Oh, yes, it does," Roland said confidently as they walked toward the gallows, the bread in their hands. Cuthbert looked abashed.

They paused beneath the crosstree, looking up at the dangling, twisting body. Cuthbert reached up and touched one hairy ankle, defiantly. The body started on a new, twisting arc.

Then, rapidly, they broke the bread and spread the crumbs beneath the dangling feet. Roland looked back just once as they rode away. Now there were thousands of birds. The bread - he grasped this only dimly - was symbolic, then.

"It was good," Cuthbert said suddenly. "It . . . I . . . I liked it. I did."

Roland was not shocked by this, although he had not particularly cared for the scene. But he thought he could perhaps understand it.

"I don't know about that," he said, "but it was something. It surely was."

The land did not fall to the good man for another ten years, and by that time he was a gunslinger, his father was dead, he himself had become a matricide - and the world had moved on.

III

"Look, " Jake said, pointing upward.

The gunslinger looked up and felt an obscure joint in his back pop. They had been in the foothills two days now, and although the waterskins were almost empty again, it didn't matter now. There would soon be all the water they could drink.

He followed the vector of Jake's finger upward, past the rise of the green plain to the naked and flashing cliffs and gorges above it . . . and on up toward the snowcap itself.

Faint and far, nothing but a tiny dot (it might have been one of those motes that dance perpetually in front of the eyes, except for its constancy), the gunslinger beheld the man in black, moving up the slopes with deadly progress, a minuscule fly on a huge granite wall.

"Is that him?" Jake asked.

The gunslinger looked at the depersonalized mote doing its faraway acrobatics, feeling nothing but a premonition of sorrow.

"That's him, Jake."

"Do you think we'll catch him?"

"Not on this side. On the other. And not if we stand here talking about it."

"They're so high," Jake said. "What's on the other side?"

"I don't know," the gunslinger said. "I don't think anybody does. Maybe they did once. Come on, boy."

They began to move upward again, sending small runnels of pebbles and sand down toward the desert that washed away behind them in a flat bake-sheet that seemed to never end. Above them, far above, the man in black moved up and up and up. It was impossible to see if he looked back. He seemed to leap across impossible gulfs,

to scale sheer faces. Once or twice he disappeared, but always they saw him again, until the violet curtain of dusk shut him out of their view. When they made their camp for the evening, the boy spoke little, and the gunslinger wondered if the boy knew what he had already intuited. He thought of Cuthbert's face, hot, dismayed, excited. He thought of the crumbs. He thought of the birds. It ends this way, he thought. Again and again it ends this way. There are quests and roads that lead ever onward, and all of them end in the same place - upon the killing ground.

Except, perhaps, the road to the Tower.

The boy, the sacrifice, his face innocent and very young in the light of their tiny fire, had fallen asleep over his beans. The gunslinger covered him with the horse blanket and then curled up to sleep himself.

THE ORACLE AND THE MOUNTAINS

The boy found the oracle and it almost destroyed him.

Some thin instinct brought the gunslinger up from sleep to the velvet darkness, which had fallen on them at dusk like a shroud of well water. That had been when he and Jake reached the grassy, nearly level oasis above the first rise of tumbled foothills. Even on the hardscrabble below,

where they had toiled and fought for every foot in the killer sun, they had been able to hear the sound of crickets rubbing their legs seductively together in the perpetual green of willow groves above them. The gunslinger remained calm in his mind, and the boy had kept up at least the pretense of a facade, and that had made the gunslinger proud. But Jake hadn't been able to hide the wildness in his eyes, which were white and starey, the eyes of a horse scenting water and held back from bolting only by the tenuous chain of its master's mind; like a horse at the point where only understanding, not the spur, could hold it steady. The gunslinger could gauge the need in Jake by the madness the sounds of the crickets bred in his own body. His arms seemed to seek out shale to scrape on, and his knees seemed to beg to be ripped in tiny, maddening, salty gashes. The sun trampled down on them all the way; even when it turned a swollen, feverish red with sunset, it shone perversely through the knife-cut in the hills off to their left, blinding them and making every teardrop of sweat into a prism of pain.

Then there was grass: at first only yellow scrub, clinging to the bleak soil where the last of the runoff reached with gruesome vitality. Further up there was witchgrass, sparse, then green and rank... then the first sweet smell of real grass, mixed with timothy and shaded by the first of the dwarfed firs. There the gunslinger saw an arc of brown movements in the shadows. He drew, fired, and felled the rabbit all before Jake could begin to cry out his surprise. A moment later he had reholstered the gun.

"Here," the gunslinger said. Up ahead the grass deepened into a jungle of green willows that was shocking after the parched sterility of the endless hardpan. There would be a spring, perhaps several of them, and it would be even cooler, but it was better out here in the open. The boy had pushed every step he could push, and there might be sucker bats in the deeper shadows of the grove. The bats might break the boy's sleep, no matter how deep it was, and if they were vampires, neither of them might awaken... at least, not in this world.

The boy said, "I'll get some wood."

The gunslinger smiled. "No, you won't. Sit yourself, Jake." Whose phrase had that been? Some woman.

The boy sat When the gunslinger got back, Jake was asleep in the grass. A large praying mantis was performing ablutions on the springy stem of Jake's cowlick. The gun slinger set the fire and went after water.

The willow jungle was deeper than he had suspected, and confusing in the failing light. But he found a spring, richly guarded by frogs and peepers. He filled one of their waterskins... and paused. The sounds that filled the night awoke an uneasy sensuality in him, a feeling that not even Allie, the woman he had bedded with in Tull, had been able to bring to the fore. Sensuality and fucking are, after all, cousins of the most tenuous relation. He chalked it up to the sudden blinding change from the desert. The softness of the dark seemed nearly decadent

He returned to the camp and skinned the rabbit while water boiled over the fire. Mixed with the last of their canned food, the rabbit made an excellent stew. He woke Jake and watched him as he ate, bleary but ravenous.

"We stay here tomorrow," the gunslinger said.

"But that man you're after.., that priest"

"He's no priest And don't worry. We've got him."

"How do you know that?"

The gunslinger could only shake his head. The knowledge was strong in him.., but it was not a good knowledge.

After the meal, he rinsed the cans they had eaten from (marveling again at his own water extravagance), and when he turned around, Jake was asleep again. The gunslinger felt the now-familiar rising and falling in his chest that he could only identify with Cuthbert. Cuthbert had been Roland's own age, but he had seemed so much younger.

His cigarette drooped toward the grass, and he tossed it into the fire. He looked at it, the clear yellow burn so different, so much cleaner, from the way the devil-grass burned. The air was wonderfully cool, and he lay down with his back to the fire. Far away, through the gash that led the way into the mountains, he heard the thick mouth of the perpetual thunder. He slept And dreamed.

Susan, his beloved, was dying before his eyes:

As he watched, his arms held by two villagers on each side, his neck dog-caught in a huge, rusty iron collar, she was dying. Even through the thick stench of the fire Roland could smell the dankness of the pit... and he could see the color of his own madness. Susan, lovely girl at the window, horse-drover's daughter.

She was turning black in the flames, her skin cracking open.

"The boy!" She was screaming. "Roland, the boy!"

He whirled, pulling his captors with him. The collar ripped at his neck and he heard the hitching, strangled sounds that were coming from his own throat. There was a sickish-sweet smell of barbecuing meat on the air.

The boy was looking down at him from a window high above the courtyard, the same window where Susan, who had taught him to be a man, had once sat and sung the old songs; "Hey Jude" and "Ease on Down the Road" and "A Hundred Leagues to Ban-berry Cross. "He looked out from the window like the statue of an alabaster saint in a cathedral. His eyes were marble. A spike had been driven through fake 's forehead.

The gunslinger felt the strangling ripping scream that signaled the beginning of his lunacy pull up from the root of his belly.

"Nnnnnnnnnn -Roland grunted a cry as he felt the fire singe him. He sat bolt upright in the dark, still feeling the dream around him, strangling him like the collar he had worn. In his twist ings and turnings he had thrown one hand against the dying coals of the fire. He put the hand to his face, feeling the dream flee, leaving only the stark picture of Jake, plaster-white, a saint for demons.

"Nnnnnnnnnn -He glared around at the mystic darkness of the willow grove, both guns out and ready. His eyes were red loopholes in the last glow from the fire.

"Nnnnnn-nnn -Jake.

The gunslinger was up and on the run. A bitter circle of moon had risen and he could follow the boy's track in the dew. He ducked under the first of the willows, splashed through the spring, and legged up the far bank, skidding in the dampness (even now his body could relish it). Willow withes slapped at his face. The trees were thicker here, and the moon was blotted out Tree trunks rose in lurching shadows. The grass, now knee-high, slapped against him. Half rotted dead branches reached for his shins, his cojones. He paused for a moment, lifting his head and scenting at the air. A ghost of a breeze helped him. The boy did not smell good, of course; neither of them did. The gunslinger's nostrils flared like those of an ape. The odor of sweat was faint, oily, unmistakable. He crashed over a deadfall of grass and bramble and downed branches, sprinted down a tunnel of overhanging willow and sumac. Moss struck his shoulders. Some clung in sighing gray tendrils.

He clawed through a last barricade of willows and came to a clearing that looked up at the stars and the highest peak of the range, gleaming skull-white at an impossible altitude.

There was a ring of tall, black stones which looked like some sort of surreal animal-trap in the moonlight In the center was a table of stone... an altar. Very old, rising out of the ground on a powerful arm of basalt

The boy stood before it, trembling back and forth. His hands shook at his sides as if infused with static electricity. The gunslinger called his name sharply, and Jake responded with that inarticulate sound of negation. The faint smear of face, almost hidden by the boy's left shoulder, looked both terrified and exalted. And there was something else.

The gunslinger stepped inside the ring and Jake screamed, recoiling and throwing up his arms. Now his face could be seen clearly, and indexed. The gunslinger saw fear and terror warring with an almost excruciating grimace of pleasure.

The gunslinger felt it touch him - the spirit of the oracle, the succubus. His loins were suddenly filled with rose light, a light that was soft yet hard. He felt his head twisting, his tongue thickening and becoming excruciatingly sensitive to even the spittle that coated it

He did not think when he pulled the half-rotted jawbone from the pocket where he had carried it since he found it in the lair of the Speaking Demon at the way station. He did not think, but it did not frighten him to operate on pure instinct He held the jawbone's frozen, prehistoric grin up in front of him, holding his other arm out stiffly, first and last fingers poked out in the ancient forked talisman, the ward against the evil eye.

The current of sensuality was whipped away from him like a drape.

Jake screamed again.

The gunslinger walked to him, and held the jawbone in front of Jake's warring eyes. A wet sound of agony. The boy tried to pull his gaze away, could not And suddenly both eyes rolled up to show the whites. Jake collapsed. His body struck the earth limply, one hand almost touching the altar. The gunslinger dropped to one knee and picked him up. He was amazingly light, as dehydrated as a November leaf from their long walk through the desert

Around him Roland could feel the presence that dwelt in the circle of stones, whirring with a

jealous anger – its prize had been taken from it When the gunslinger passed out of the circle, the sense of frustrated jealousy faded. He carried Jake back to their camp. By the time they got there, the boy's twitching unconsciousness had become deep sleep. The gunslinger paused for a moment above the gray ruin of the fire. The moonlight on Jake's face reminded him again of a church saint, alabaster purity all unknown. He suddenly hugged the boy, knowing that he loved him. And it seemed that he could almost feel the laughter from the man in black, someplace far above them.

Jake was calling him; that was how he awoke. He had tied the boy firmly to one of the tough bushes that grew nearby, and the boy was hungry and upset By the sun, it was almost nine-thirty.

"Why'd you tie me up?" Jake asked indignantly as the gunslinger loosened the thick knots in the blanket "I wasn't going to run away!"

"You did run away," the gunslinger said, and the expression on Jake's face made him smile. "I had to go out and get you. You were sleepwalking."

"I was?" Jake looked at him suspiciously.

The gunslinger nodded and suddenly produced the jawbone. He held it in front of Jake's face and Jake flinched away from it, raising his arm.

"See?"

Jake nodded, bewildered.

"I have to go off for a while now. I may be gone the whole day. So listen to me, boy. It's important If sunset comes and I'm not back – "

Fear flashed on Jake's face. "You're leaving me!"

The gunslinger only looked at him.

"No," Jake said after a moment "I guess you're not."

"I want you to stay right here while I'm gone. And if you feel strange – funny in any way – you pick up this bone and hold it in your hands."

Hate and disgust crossed Jake's face, mixed with bewilderment. "I couldn't. I . . . I just couldn't"

"You can. You may have to. Especially after midday. It's important. Dig?"

"Why do you have to go away?" Jake burst out.

"I just do."

The gunslinger caught another fascinating glimpse of the steel that lay under the boy's surface, as enigmatic as the story he had told about coming from a city where the buildings were so tall they actually scraped the sky.

"All right," Jake said.

The gunslinger laid the jawbone carefully on the ground next to the ruins of the fire, where it grinned up through the grass like some eroded fossil that has seen the light of day after a night of five thousand years. Jake would not look at it His face was pale and miserable. The gunslinger wondered if it would profit them for him to put the boy to sleep and question him, but he decided there would be little gain. He knew well enough that the spirit of the stone circle was surely a demon, and very likely an oracle as well. A demon with no shape, only a kind of unformed sexual glare with the eye of prophecy. He wondered sardonically if it might not be the soul of Sylvia Pittston, the giant woman whose religious huckstering had led to the final showdown in Tull... but knew it was not. The stones in the circle had been ancient, this particular demon's territory staked out long before the earliest shade of pre-history. But the gunslinger knew the forms of speaking quite well and did not think the boy would have to use the jawbone mojo. The voice and mind of the oracle would be more than occupied with him. And the gunslinger needed to know things, in spite of the risk... and the risk was high. For both Jake and himself, he needed desperately to know.

The gunslinger opened his tobacco poke and pawed through it, pushing the dry strands of leaf aside until he came to a minuscule object wrapped in a fragment of white paper. He hefted it in his hand, looking absently up at the sky. Then he unwrapped it and held the contents – a tiny white pill with edges that had been much worn with traveling – in his hand.

Jake looked at it curiously. "What's that?"

The gunslinger uttered a short laugh. "The philosopher's stone," he said. "The story that Cort used to tell us was that the Old Gods pissed over the desert and made mescaline."

Jake only looked puzzled.

"A drug," the gunslinger said. "But not one that puts you to sleep. One that wakes you up all the way for a little while."

"Like LSD," the boy agreed instantly and then looked puzzled.

"What's that?"

"I don't know," Jake said. "It just popped out I think it came from... you know, before."

The gunslinger nodded, but he was doubtful. He had never heard of mescaline referred to as LSD, not even in Marten's old books.

"Will it hurt you?" Jake asked.

"It never has," the gunslinger said, conscious of the evasion.

"I don't like it"

"Never mind."

The gunslinger squatted in front of the waterskin, took a mouthful, and swallowed the pill. As always, he felt an immediate reaction in his mouth; it seemed overloaded with saliva. He sat down before the dead fire.

"When does something happen to you?" Jake asked.

"Not for a little while. Be quiet."

So Jake was quiet, watching with open suspicion as the gunslinger went calmly about the ritual of cleaning his guns.

He reholstered them and said, "Your shirt, Jake. Take it off and give it to me."

Jake pulled his faded shirt reluctantly over his head and gave it to the gunslinger.

The gunslinger produced a needle that had been threaded into the side-seam of his jeans, and thread from an empty cartridge-loop in his gunbelt. He began to sew up a long rip in one of the sleeves of the boy's shirt. As he finished and handed the shirt back, he felt the mesc beginning to take hold - there was a tightening in his stomach and a feeling that all the muscles in his body were being cranked up a notch.

"I have to go," he said, getting up.

The boy half rose, his face a shadow of concern, and then he settled back. "Be careful," he said.

"Please."

"Remember the jawbone," the gunslinger said. He put his hand on Jake's head as he went by and touseled the corn-colored hair. The gesture startled him into a short laugh. Jake watched after him with a troubled smile until he was gone into the willow jungle.

The gunslinger walked deliberately toward the circle of stones, pausing once to get a cool drink from the spring. He could see his own reflection in a tiny pool edged with moss and lily pads, and he looked at himself for a moment, as fascinated as Narcissus. The mind-reaction was beginning to settle in, slowing down his chain of thought by seeming to increase the connotations of every idea and every bit of sensory input. Things began to take on weight and thickness that had been heretofore invisible. He paused, getting to his feet again, and looked through the tangled snarl of willows. Sunlight slanted through in a golden, dusty bar, and he watched the interplay of motes and tiny flying things for a moment before going on.

The drug often had disturbed him: his ego was too strong (or perhaps just too simple) to enjoy being eclipsed and peeled back, made a target for more sensitive emotions

- they tickled at him like a cat's whiskers. But this time he felt fairly calm. That was good.

He stepped into the clearing and walked straight into the circle. He stood, letting his mind run free. Yes, it was coming harder now, faster. The grass screamed green at him; it seemed that if he bent over and rubbed his hands in it he would stand up with green paint all over his fingers and palms. He resisted a puckish urge to try the experiment

But there was no voice from the oracle. No sexual stirring.

He went to the altar, stood beside it for a moment coherent thought was now almost impossible. His teeth felt strange in his head. The world held too much light. He climbed up on the altar and lay back. His mind was becoming a jungle full of strange thought-plants that he had never seen or suspected before, a willow-jungle that had grown up around a mescaline spring. The sky was water and he hung suspended over it. The thought gave him a vertigo that seemed faraway and unimportant.

A line of old poetry occurred to him, not a nursery verse now, no; his mother had feared the drugs and the necessity of them (as she had feared Cort and the necessity for this beater of boys); this verse came from one of the Dens to the north of the desert, where men still lived among the machines that usually didn't work... and which sometimes ate the men when they did. The lines played again and again, reminding him (in an unconnected way that was typical of the mescaline rush) of snow falling in a globe he had owned as a child, mystic and half fantastical:

Beyond the reach of human range

A drop of hell, a touch of strange...

The trees which overhung the altar contained faces. He watched them with abstracted fascination:

Here was a dragon, green and twitching. Here a wood-nymph with beckoning branch arms. Here a living skull overgrown with slime. Faces. Faces.

The grasses of the clearing suddenly whipped and bent

I come.

I come.

Vague stirrings within his flesh. How far I have come,  
he thought From couching with Susan in sweet hay to this. She pressed over him, a body made of the  
wind, a breast

of sudden fragrant jasmine, rose, and honeysuckle.

"Make your prophecy," he said. His mouth felt full of metal.

A sigh. A faint sound of weeping. The gunslinger's genitals felt drawn and hard. Over him and  
beyond the faces in the leaves, he could see the mountains – hard and brutal and full of teeth.  
The body moved against him, struggled with him. He felt his hands curl into fists. She had sent  
him a vision of Susan. It was Susan above him, lovely Susan at the window, waiting for him with  
her hair spilled down her back and over her shoulders. He tossed his head, but her face followed.  
Jasmine, rose, honeysuckle, old hay.., the smell of love. Love me.

"Speak prophecy," he said.

Please, the oracle wept. Don't be cold. It is always so cold here –Hands slipping over his flesh,  
manipulating, lighting

him on fire. Pulling him. Drawing. A black crevice. The ultimate wanton. Wet and warm –No. Dry.  
Cold. Sterile.

Have a touch of mercy, gunslinger. Ah, please, I beg your favor! Mercy!

Would you have mercy on the boy?

What boy? I know no boy. It's not boys I need. O please. Jasmine, rose, honeysuckle. Dry hay with  
its ghost of summer clover. Oil decanted from ancient urns. A riot for flesh.

"After," he said.

Now. Please. Now.

He let his mind coil out at her, the antithesis of emotion. The body that hung over him froze and  
seemed to scream.

There was a brief, vicious tug-of-war between his temples

– his mind was the rope, gray and fibrous. For long moments there was no sound but the quiet hush  
of his breathing and the faint breeze which made the green faces in the trees shift, wink, and  
grimace. No bird sang.

Her hold loosened. Again there was the sound of sobbing. It would have to be quick, or she would  
leave him. To stay now meant attenuation; perhaps her own kind of death. Already he felt her  
drawing away to leave the circle of stones. Wind rippled the grass in tortured patterns.

"Prophecy," he said – a bleak noun.

A weeping, tired sigh. He could almost have granted the mercy she begged, but – there was Jake. He  
would have found Jake dead or insane if he had been any later last night

Sleep, then.

"No."

Then half-sleep.

The gunslinger turned his eyes up to the faces in the leaves. A play was being enacted there for  
his amusement Worlds rose and fell before him. Empires were built across shining sands where  
forever machines toiled in abstract electronic frenzies. Empires declined and fell. Wheels that  
had spun like silent liquid moved more slowly, began to squeak, began to scream, stopped. Sand  
choked the stainless steel gutters of concentric streets below dark skies full of stars like beds  
of cold jewels. And through it all, a dying wind of change blew, bringing with it the cinnamon  
smell of late October. The gunslinger watched as the world moved on.

And half-slept

Three. This is the number of your/ate.

Three?

Yes, three is mystic. Three stands at the heart 0/the mantra.

Which three?

'We see in part, and thus is the mirror of prophecy darkened.'

Tell me what you can.

The first is young, dark-haired. He stands on the brink of robbery and murder. A demon has  
infested him. The name of the demon is HEROIN

Which demon is that? I know it not, even from nursery stories.

'We see in part, and thus is the mirror of prophecy darkened. 'There are other worlds, gunslinger,  
and other demons. These waters are deep.

The second?

She comes on wheels. Her mind is iron but her heart and eyes are soft. I see no more.

The third?

In chains.

The man in black? Where is he?

Near. You will speak with him.

Of what will we speak?

The Tower.

The boy? Jake?

Tell me of the boy!

The boy is your gateway to the man in black. The man in black is your gate to the three. The three are your way to the Dark Tower.

How? How can that be? Why must it be? 'We see in part, and thus is the mirror -God damn you.

No god damned me.

"Don't patronize me, Thing. I'm stronger than you.

What do they call you, then? Star-slut? Whore of the Winds?

Some live on love that comes to the ancient places... even

in these sad and evil times. Some, gunslinger, live on blood. Even, I understand, on the blood of young boys.

May he not be spared?

Yes.

How?

Cease, gunslinger. Strike your camp and turn west. In the west there is still a need for men who live by the bullet.

I am sworn by my father's guns and by the treachery of Marten.

Marten is no more. The man in black has eaten his soul. This you know.

I am sworn.

Then you are damned.

Have your way with me, bitch.

Eagerness.

The shadow swung over him, enfolded him. Suddenly ecstasy broken only by a galaxy of pain, as faint and bright as ancient stars gone red with collapse. Faces came to him unbidden at the climax of their coupling: Sylvia Pittston, Alice, the woman from Tull, Susan, Aileen, a hundred others. And finally, after an eternity, he pushed her away from him, once again in his right mind, bone-weary and disgusted.

No! It isn't enough! It -"Let me be," the gunslinger said. He sat up and almost

fell off the altar before regaining his feet. She touched him tentatively

(honeysuckle, jasmine, sweet attar)

and he pushed her violently, falling to his knees.

He staggered up and made his drunken way to the perimeter of the circle. He staggered through, feeling a huge weight fall from his shoulders. He drew a shuddering, weeping breath. As he started away he could feel

her standing at the bars of her prison, watching him go from her. He wondered how long it might be before someone else crossed the desert and found her, hungry and alone. For a moment he felt dwarfed by the possibilities of time.

"You're sick!"

Jake stood up fast when the gunslinger shambled back through the last trees and came into camp.

Jake had been huddled by the ruins of the tiny fire, the jawbone across his knees, gnawing disconsolately on the bones of the rabbit. Now he ran toward the gunslinger with a look of distress that made Roland feel the full, ugly weight of a coming betrayal - one he sensed which might only be the first of many.

"No," he said. "Not sick. Just tired. I'm whipped." He gestured absently at the jawbone. "You can throw that away."

Jake threw it quickly and violently, rubbing his hands across his shirt after doing it.

The gunslinger sat down - almost fell down - feeling the aching joints and the pummeled, thick mind that was the unlovely afterglow of mescaline. His crotch also pulsed with a dull ache. He rolled a cigarette with careful, unthinking slowness. Jake watched. The gunslinger had a sudden impulse to tell him what he had learned, then thrust the idea away with horror. He wondered if a part of him - mind or soul - might not be disintegrating.

"We sleep here tonight," the gunslinger said. "Tomorrow we climb. I'll go out a little later and see if I can't shoot something for supper. I've got to sleep now. Okay?"

"Sure."

The gunslinger nodded and lay back. When he woke up the shadows were long across the small grass clearing. "Build up the fire," he told Jake and tossed him his flint and steel. "Can you use that?"

"Yes, I think so."

The gunslinger walked toward the willow grove and then turned left, skirting it. At a place where the ground opened out and upward in heavy open grass, he stepped back into the shadows and stood silently. Faintly, clearly, he could hear the clik-clink-clik-clink of Jake striking sparks. He stood without moving for ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. Three rabbits came, and the gunslinger pulled leather. He took down the two plumpest, skinned them and gutted them, brought them back to the camp. Jake had the fire going and the water was already steaming over it.

The gunslinger nodded to him. "That's a good piece of work."

Jake flushed with pleasure and silently handed back the flint and steel.

While the stew cooked, the gunslinger used the last of the light to go back into the willow grove. Near the first pool he began to hack at the tough vines that grew near the water's marshy verge. Later, as the fire burned down to coals and Jake slept, he would plait them into ropes that might be of some limited use later. But he did not think somehow that the climb would be a particularly difficult one. He felt a sense of fate that he no longer even considered odd.

The vines bled green sap over his hands as he carried them back to where Jake waited.

They were up with the sun and packed in half an hour. The gunslinger hoped to shoot another rabbit in the meadow as they fed, but time was short and no rabbit showed itself. The bundle of their remaining food was now so small and light that Jake carried it easily. He had toughened up, this boy; you could see it.

The gunslinger carried their water, freshly drawn from one of the springs. He looped his three vine ropes

around his belly. They gave the circle of stones a wide berth (the gunslinger was afraid the boy might feel a recurrence of fear, but when they passed above it on a stony rise, Jake only offered it a passing glance and then looked at a bird that hovered upwind). Soon enough, the trees began to lose their height and lushness. Trunks were twisted and roots seemed to struggle with the earth in a tortured hunt for moisture.

"It's all so old," Jake said glumly when they paused for a rest. "Isn't there anything young?"

The gunslinger smiled and gave Jake an elbow. "You are," he said.

"Will it be a hard climb?"

The gunslinger looked at him, curious. "The mountains are high. Don't you think it will be a hard climb?"

Jake looked back at him, his eyes clouded, puzzled. "No."

They went on.

The sun climbed to its zenith, seemed to hang there more briefly than it ever had during the desert crossing, and then passed on, giving them back their shadows. Shelves of rock protruded from the rising land like the arms of giant easychairs buried in the earth. The scrub grass turned yellow and sere. Finally they were faced with a deep, chim neylike crevasse in their path and they scaled a short, peeling rise of rock to get around and above it. The ancient granite had faulted on lines that were steplike, and as they had both intuited, the climb was an easy one. They paused on the four-foot-wide scarp at the top and looked back over the falling land to the desert, which curled around the up land like a huge yellow paw. Further off it gleamed at them in a white shield that dazzled the eye, receding into dim waves of rising heat. The gunslinger felt faintly amazed at the realization that this desert had nearly murdered him.

From where they stood, in a new coolness, the desert certainly appeared momentous, but not deadly. They turned back to the business of the climb, scrambling over jackstraw falls of rock and crouch-walking up inclined planes of stone shot with glitters of quartz and mica. The rock was pleasantly warm to the touch, but the air was definitely cooler. In the late afternoon the gunslinger heard the faint sound of thunder. The rising line of the mountains obscured the sight of the rain on the other side, however.

When the shadows began to turn purple, they camped in the overhang of a jutting brow of rock. The gunslinger anchored their blanket above and below, fashioning a kind of shanty lean-to. They sat at the mouth of it, watching the sky spread a cloak over the world. Jake dangled his feet over the drop. The gunslinger rolled his evening smoke and eyed Jake half humorously. "Don't roll over in your sleep," he said, "or you may wake up in hell."



"I won't," Jake replied seriously. "My mother says -He broke it off.

"She says what?"

"That I sleep like a dead man," Jake finished. He looked at the gunslinger, who saw that the boy's mouth was trembling as he strove to keep back tears - only a boy, he thought, and pain smote him, like the ice pick that too much cold water can sometimes plant in the forehead. Only a boy. Why? Silly question. When a boy, wounded in body or spirit, called that question out to Cort, that ancient, scarred baffle-engine whose job it was to teach the sons of gunslingers the beginning of what they had to know, Cort would answer:

Why is a crooked letter and can't be made straight... never mind why, just get up, pus-head! Gel up! The day's young!

"Why am I here?" Jake asked. "Why did I forget everything from before?"

"Because the man in black has drawn you here," the gunslinger said. "And because of the Tower. The Tower stands at a kind of... power-nexus. In time. "

"I don't understand that!"

"Nor do I," the gunslinger said. "But something has been happening. Just in my own time. 'The world has moved on,' we say... we've always said. But it's moving on faster now. Something has happened to time."

They sat in silence. A breeze, faint but with an edge, picked at their legs. Somewhere it made a hollow whooooo in a rock fissure.

"Where do you come from?" Jake asked.

"From a place that no longer exists. Do you know the Bible?"

"Jesus and Moses. Sure."

The gunslinger smiled. "That's right. My land had a Biblical name - New Canaan, it was called. The land of milk and honey. In the Bible's Canaan, there were supposed to be grapes so big that men had to carry them on sledges. We didn't grow them that big, but it was a sweet land."

"I know about Ulysses," Jake said hesitantly. "Was he in the Bible?"

"Maybe," the gunslinger said. "The Book is lost now

- all except the parts I was forced to memorize.

"But the others - "

"No others," the gunslinger said. "I'm the last."

A tiny wasted moon began to rise, casting its slitted gaze down into the tumble of rocks where they sat.

"Was it pretty? Your country.., your land?"

"It was beautiful," the gunslinger said absently. "There were fields and rivers and mists in the morning. But that's only pretty. My mother used to say that.., and that the only real beauty is order and love and light."

Jake made a noncommittal noise.

The gunslinger smoked and thought of how it had been

- the nights in the huge central hall, hundreds of richly clad figures moving through the slow, steady waltz steps or the faster, light ripples of the pol-kam, Aileen on his arm, her eyes brighter than the most precious gems, the light of the crystal-enclosed electric lights making highlights in the newly done hair of the courtesans and their half-cynical amours. The hall had been huge, an island of light whose age was beyond telling, as was the whole Central Place, which was made up of nearly a hundred stone castles. It had been twelve years since he had seen it, and leaving for the last time, Roland had ached as he turned his face away from it and began his first cast for the trail of the man in black. Even then, twelve years ago, the walls had fallen, weeds grew in the courtyards, bats roosted amongst the great beams of the central hall, and the galleries echoed with the soft swoop and whisper of swallows. The fields where Cort had taught them archery and gunnery and falconry were gone to hay and timothy and wild vines. In the huge and echoey kitchen where Hax had once held his own fuming and aromatic court, a grotesque colony of Slow Mutants nested, peering at him from the merciful darkness of pantries and shadowed pillars. The warm steam that had been filled with the pungent odors of roasting beef and pork had been transmuted to the clammy damp of moss and huge white toadstools grew in corners where not even the Slow Muties dared to encamp. The huge oak subcellar bulkhead stood open, and the most poignant smell of all had issued from that, and odor that seemed to symbolize with a flat finality all the hard facts of dissolution and decay: the high sharp odor of wine gone to vinegar. It had been no struggle to turn his face to the south and leave it behind - but it had hurt his heart.

"Was there a war?" Jake asked.

"Even better," the gunslinger said and pitched the last smoldering ember of his cigarette away.

"There was a revolution. We won every battle, and lost the war. No one won the war, unless maybe it was the scavengers. There must have been rich pickings for years after."

"I wish I'd lived there," Jake said wistfully.

"It was another world," the gunslinger said. "Time to turn in."

The boy, now only a dim shadow, turned on his side and curled up with the blanket tossed loosely over him. The gunslinger sat sentinel over him for perhaps an hour after, thinking his long, sober thoughts. Such meditation was a new thing for him, novel, sweet in a melancholy sort of way, but still utterly without practical value: there was no solution to the problem of Jake other than the one the Oracle had offered – and that was simply not possible. There might have been tragedy in the situation, but the gunslinger did not see that; he saw only the predestination that had always been there. And finally, his more natural character reasserted itself and he slept deeply, with no dreams.

The climb became grimmer on the following day as they continued to angle toward the narrow V of the pass through the mountains. The gunslinger pushed slowly, still with no sense of hurry. The dead stone beneath their feet left no trace of the man in black, but the gunslinger knew he had been this way before them – and not only from the path of his climb as he and Jake had observed him, tiny and bug-like, from the foothills. His aroma was printed on every cold downdraft of air. It was an oily, sardonic odor, as bitter to his nose as the aroma of devil-grass. Jake's hair had grown much longer, and it curled slightly at the base of his sunburned neck. He climbed tough, moving with sure-footedness and no apparent acrophobia as they crossed gaps or scaled their way up ledged facings. Twice already he had gone up in places the gunslinger could not have managed. Jake had anchored one of the ropes so that the gunslinger could climb up hand over hand.

The following morning they climbed through a coldly damp snatch of cloud that began blotting out the tumbled slopes below them. Patches of hard, granulated snow began to appear nestled in some of the deeper pockets of stone. It glittered like quartz and its texture was as dry as sand. That afternoon they found a single footprint in one of these snow patches. Jake stared at it for a moment with awful fascination, then looked up frightfully, as if expecting to see the man in black materialize into his own footprint. The gunslinger tapped him on the shoulder then and pointed ahead. "Go. The day's getting old."

Later, they made camp in the last of the daylight on a wide, flat ledge to the east and north of the cut that slanted into the heart of the mountains. The air was frigid; they could see the puffs of their breath, and the humid sound of thunder in the red-and-purple afterglow of the day was surreal, slightly lunatic.

The gunslinger thought the boy might begin to question him, but there were no questions from Jake. The boy fell almost immediately into sleep. The gunslinger followed his example. He dreamed again of the dark place in the earth, the dungeon, and again of Jake as an alabaster saint with a nail through his forehead. He awoke with a gasp, instinctively reaching for the jawbone that was no longer there, expecting to feel the grass of that ancient grove. He felt rock instead, and the cold thinness of altitude in his lungs. Jake was asleep beside him, but his sleep was not easy: he twisted and mumbled inarticulate words to himself, chasing his own phantoms. The gunslinger laid over uneasily, and slept again.

They were another week before they reached the end of the beginning – for the gunslinger, a twisted prologue of twelve years, from the final crash of his native place and the gathering of the other three. For Jake, the gateway had been a strange death in another world. For the gunslinger it had been a stranger death yet – the endless hunt for the man in black through a world with neither map nor memory. Cuthbert and the others were gone, all of them gone: Randolph, Jamie de Curry, Aileen, Susan, Marten (yes, they had dragged him down, and there had been gunplay, and even that grape had been bitter). Until finally only three remained of the old world, three like dreadful cards from a terrible deck of tarot cards: gunslinger, man in black, and the Dark Tower.

A week after Jake saw the footstep, they faced the man in black for a brief moment of time. In that moment, the gunslinger felt he could almost understand the gravid implication of the Tower itself, for that moment seemed to stretch out forever.

They continued southwest, reaching a point perhaps halfway through the Cyclopean mountain range, and just as the going seemed about to become really difficult for the first time (above them, seeming to lean out, the icy ledges and screaming buttes made the gunslinger feel an unpleasant reverse vertigo), they began to descend again along the side of the narrow pass. An angular, zigzagging path led them toward a canyon floor where an ice-edged stream boiled with slaty, headlong power from higher country still.

On that afternoon the boy paused and looked back at the gunslinger, who had paused to wash his face in the stream.

"I smell him," Jake said.

"So do I."

Ahead of them the mountain threw up its final defense

— a huge slab of insurmountable granite facing that climbed into cloudy infinity. At any moment the gunslinger expected a twist in the stream to bring them upon a high waterfall and the insurmountable smoothness of rock — dead end. But the air here had that odd magnifying quality that is common to high places, and it was another day before they reached that great granite face. The gunslinger began to feel the dreadful tug of anticipation again, the feeling that it was all finally in his grasp. Near the end, he had to fight himself to keep from breaking into a trot. "Wait!" The boy had stopped suddenly. They faced a sharp elbow-bend in the stream; it boiled and frothed with high energy around the eroded hang of a giant sandstone boulder. All that morning they had been in the shadow of the mountains as the canyon narrowed.

Jake was trembling violently and his face had gone pale.

"What's the matter?"

"Let's go back," Jake whispered. "Let's go back quick."

The gunslinger's face was wooden.

"Please?" The boy's face was drawn, and his jawline shook with suppressed agony. Through the heavy blanket of stone they still heard thunder, as steady as machines in the earth. The slice of sky they could see had itself assumed a turbulent, gothic gray above them as warm and cold currents met and warred.

"Please, please!" The boy raised a fist, as if to strike the gunslinger's chest.

"No."

The boy's face took on wonder. "You're going to kill me. He killed me the first time and you are going to kill me now."

The gunslinger felt the lie on his lips. He spoke it:

"You'll be all right" And a greater lie. "I'll take care. "

Jake's face went gray, and he said no more. He put an unwilling hand out, and he and the gunslinger went around the elbow-bend. They came face to face with that final rising wall and the man in black.

He stood no more than twenty feet above them, just to the right of the waterfall that crashed and spilled from a huge ragged hole in the rock. Unseen wind rippled and tugged at his hooded robe. He held a staff in one hand. The other hand he held out to them in a mocking gesture of welcome. He seemed a prophet, and below that rushing sky, mounted on a ledge of rock, a prophet of doom, his voice the voice of Jeremiah.

"Gunslinger! How well you fulfill the prophecies of old! Good day and good day and good day!" He laughed, the sound echoing ever over the bellow of the falling water.

Without a thought and seemingly without a click of motor relays, the gunslinger had drawn his pistols. The boy cowered to his right and behind, a small shadow.

Roland fired three times before he could gain control of his traitor hands — the echoes bounced their bronze tones against the rock valley that rose around them, over the sound of the wind and water.

A spray of granite puffed over the head of the man in black; a second to the left of his hood; a third to the right. He had missed cleanly all three times.

The man in black laughed — a full, hearty laugh that seemed to challenge the receding echo of gunshots. "Would you kill all your answers so easily, gunslinger?"

"Come down," the gunslinger said. "Answers all around."

Again that huge, derisive laugh. "It's not your bullets I fear, Roland. It's your idea of answers that scares me. "

"Come down."

"The other side, I think," the man in black said. "On the other side we will hold much council."

His eyes flicked to Jake and he added:

"Just the two of us."

Jake flinched away from him with a small, whining cry, and the man in black turned, his robe swirling in the gray air like a batwing. He disappeared into the cleft in the rock from which the water spewed at full force. The gunslinger exercised grim will and did not send a bullet after him — would you kill all your answers so easily, gunslinger?

There was only the sound of wind and water, sounds that had been in this place of desolation for a thousand years. Yet the man in black had been here. After these twelve years, Roland had seen him close-up, spoken to him. And the man in black had laughed at him.

On the other side we will hold much council.

The boy looked up at him with dumbly submissive sheep's eyes, his body trembling. For a moment the

gunslinger saw the face of Alice, the girl from Tull, superimposed over Jake's, the scar standing out on her forehead like a mute accusation, and felt brute loathing for them both (it would not occur to him until much later that both the scar on Alice's forehead and the nail he saw spiked through Jake's forehead in his dreams were in the same place). Jake seemed to catch a whiff of his thought and a moan was dragged from his throat. But it was short; he twisted his lips shut over it. He held the makings of a fine man, perhaps a gunslinger in his own right if given time. Just the two of us.

The gunslinger felt a great and unholy thirst in some deep unknown pit of his body, a thirst no wine could touch. Worlds trembled, almost within reach of his fingers, and in some instinctual way he strove not to be corrupted, knowing in his colder mind that such strife was vain and always would be.

It was noon. He looked up, letting the cloudy, unsettled daylight shine for the last time on the all-too-vulnerable sun of his own righteousness. No one ever really pays for it in silver, he thought. The price of any evil - necessary or otherwise - comes due in flesh.

"Come with me or stay," the gunslinger said.

The boy only looked at him mutely. And to the gunslinger, in that final and vital moment of uncoupling from a moral principle, he ceased to be Jake and became only the boy, an impersonality to be moved and used.

Something screamed in the windy stillness; he and the boy both heard.

The gunslinger began, and after a moment Jake came after. Together they climbed the tumbled rock beside the steely-cold falls, and stood where the man in black had stood before them. And together they entered in where he had disappeared. The darkness swallowed them.

## THE SLOW MUTANTS

The gunslinger spoke slowly to Jake in the rising and falling inflections of a dream:

"There were three of us: Cuthbert, Jamie, and I. We weren't supposed to be there, because none of us had passed from the time of children. If we had been caught, Cort would have striped us. But we weren't. I don't think any of the ones that went before us were caught, either. Boys must put on their fathers' pants in private, strut them in front of the mirror, and then sneak them back on their hangers; it was like that. The father pretends he doesn't notice the new way they are hung up, or the traces of boot-polish mustaches still under their noses. Do you see?" The boy said nothing. He had said nothing since they had relinquished the daylight. The gunslinger had talked hectically, feverishly, to fill his silence. He had not looked back at the lights as they passed into the lightlessness beneath the mountains, but the boy had. The gunslinger had read the failing of day in the soft mirror of Jake's cheek:

Now faint rose; now milk-glass; now pallid silver; now the last dusk-glow touch of evening; now nothing. The gunslinger had struck a false light and they had gone on.

Now they were camped. No echo from the man in black returned to them. Perhaps he had stopped to rest, too. Or perhaps he floated onward and without running-lights, through nighted chambers.

"It was held once a year in the Great Hall," the gunslinger went on. "We called it The Hall of Grandfathers. But it was only the Great Hall."

The sound of dripping water came to their ears.

"A courting rite." The gunslinger laughed deprecatingly, and the insensate walls made the sound into a loon-like wheeze. "In the old days, the books say, it was the welcoming of spring. But civilization, you know...."

He trailed off, unable to describe the change inherent in that mechanized noun, the death of the romantic and its sterile, carnal revenant, living only a forced respiration of glitter and ceremony; the geometric steps of courtship during the Easter-night dance at the Great Hall which had replaced the mad scribble of love which he could only intuit dimly - hollow grandeur in the place of mean and sweeping passions which might once have erased souls.

"They made something decadent out of it," the gunslinger said. "A play. A game." In his voice was all the unconscious distaste of the ascetic. His face, had there been stronger light to illumine it, would have shown change -harshness and sorrow. But his essential force had not been cut or diluted. The lack of imagination that still remained in that face was remarkable.

"But the Ball," the gunslinger said. "The Ball. . ."

The boy did not speak.

"There were five crystal chandeliers, heavy glass with electric lights. It was all light, it was an island of light.

"We had sneaked into one of the old balconies, the ones that were supposed to be unsafe. But we were still boys. We were above everything, and we could look down on it I don't remember that any of us said anything. We only looked, and we looked for hours.

"There was a great stone table where the gunslingers and their women sat, watching the dancers. A few of the gunslingers danced, but only a few. And they were the young ones. The other ones only sat, and it seemed to me they were half embarrassed in all that light, that civilized light. They were revered ones, the feared ones, the guardians, but they seemed like hostlers in that crowd of cavaliers with their soft women. . . .

"There were four circular tables loaded with food, and they turned all the time. The cooks' boys never stopped coming and going from seven until three the next morning. The tables rotated like clocks, and we could smell roast pork, beef, lobster, chickens, baked apples. There were ices and candies. There were great flaming skewers of meat.

"And Marten sat next to my mother and father - I knew them even from so high above - and once she and Marten danced, slowly and revolvingly, and the others cleared the floor for them and clapped when it was over. The gunslingers did not clap, but my father stood slowly and held his hands out to her. And she went, smiling.

"It was a moment of passage, boy. A time such as must be at the Tower itself, when things come together and hold and make power in time. My father had taken control, had been acknowledged and singled out. Marten was the acknowledger; my father was the mover. And his wife my mother, went to him, the connection between them. Betrayer.

"My father was the last lord of light."

The gunslinger looked down at his hands. The boy still said nothing. His face was only thoughtful.

"I remember how they danced," the gunslinger said softly. "My mother and Marten the enchanter. I remember how they danced, revolving slowly together and apart, in the old steps of courtship."

He looked at the boy, smiling. "But it meant nothing, you know. Because power had been passed in some way that none of them knew but all understood, and my mother was locked root and rind to the holder and wielder of that power. Was it not so? She went to him when the dance was over, didn't she? And clasped his hand? Did they applaud? Did the hall ring with it as those pansy-boys and their soft ladies applauded and lauded him? Did it? Did it?"

Bitter water dripped distantly in the darkness. The boy said nothing.

"I remember how they danced," the gunslinger said softly. "I remember how they danced. . . . "He looked up at the unseeable stone roof and it seemed for a moment that he might scream at it, rail at it, challenge it blindly - those dumb tonnages of insensible granite that bore their tiny lives in its stone intestine.

"What hand could have held the knife that did my father to his death?"

"I'm tired," the boy said wistfully.

The gunslinger lapsed into silence, and the boy laid over and put one hand between his cheek and the stone. The little flame in front of them guttered. The gunslinger rolled a smoke. It seemed he could see the crystal light still, in the sardonic hall of his memory; hear the shout of accolade, empty in a husked land that stood even then hopeless against a gray ocean of time. The island of light hurt him bitterly, and he wished he had never held witness to it, or to his father's cuckoldry.

He passed smoke between his mouth and nostrils, looking down at the boy. How we make large circles in earth for ourselves, he thought. How long before the daylight again?

He slept.

After the sound of his breathing had become long and steady and regular, the boy opened his eyes and looked at the gunslinger with an expression that was very much like love. The last light of the fire caught in one pupil for a moment and was drowned there. He went to sleep.

The gunslinger had lost most of his time sense in the desert, which was changeless; he lost the rest of it here in these chambers under the mountains, which were lightless. Neither of them had any means of telling time, and the concept of hours became meaningless. In a sense, they stood outside of time. A day might have been a week, or a week a day. They walked, they slept, they ate thinly. Their only companion was the steady thundering rush of the water, drilling its auger path through the stone. They followed it, drank from its flat, mineral-salted depth. At times the gunslinger thought he saw fugitive drifting lights like corpse-lamps beneath its surface, but supposed they were only projections of his brain, which had not forgotten the light. Still, he cautioned the boy not to put his feet in the water.

The range finder in his head took them on steadily.

The path beside the river (for it was a path; smooth, sunken to a slight concavity) led always

upward, toward the river's head. At regular intervals they came to curved stone pylons with sunken ringbolts; perhaps once oxen or stage-horses had tethered there. At each was a steel flagon holding an electric torch, but these were all barren of life and light. During the third period of rest-before-sleep, the boy wandered away a little. The gunslinger could hear small conversation of rattled pebbles as he moved cautiously.

"

"Careful," he said. "You can't see where you are.

"I'm crawling. It's . . . say!"

"What is it?" The gunslinger half crouched, touching the haft of one gun.

There was a slight pause. The gunslinger strained his eyes uselessly.

"I think it's a railroad," the boy said dubiously.

The gunslinger got up and walked slowly toward the sound of Jake's voice, leading with one foot lightly to test for pitfalls.

"Here." A hand reached out and cat's-pawed the gunslinger's face. The boy was very good in the dark, better than the gunslinger himself. His eyes seemed to dilate until there was no color left in them: the gunslinger saw this as he struck a meager light. There was no fuel in this rock womb, and what they had brought with them was going rapidly to ash. At times the urge to strike a light was well-nigh insatiable.

The boy was standing beside a curved rock wall that was lined with parallel metal staves off into the darkness. Each carried black bulbs that might once have been conductors of electricity. And beside and below, set only inches off the stone floor, were tracks of bright metal. What might have run on those tracks at one time? The gunslinger could only imagine black electric bullets, flying through this forever night with affrighted searchlight eyes going before. He had never heard of such things. But there were skeletons in the world, just as there were demons. He had once come upon a hermit who had gained a quasi-religious power over a miserable flock of kine-keepers by possession of an ancient gasoline pump. The hermit crouched beside it, one arm wrapped possessively around it, and preached wild, guttering, sullen sermons. He occasionally placed the still-bright steel nozzle, which was attached to a rotted rubber hose, between his legs. On the pump, in perfectly legible (although rust-clotted) letters, was a legend of unknown meaning: AMOCO. Lead Free. Amoco had become the totem of a thundergod, and they had worshipped Him with the half-mad slaughter of sheep.

Hulks, the gunslinger thought. Only meaningless hulks in sands that once were seas.

And now a railroad.

"We'll follow it," he said.

The boy said nothing.

The gunslinger extinguished the light and they slept. When the gunslinger awoke the boy was up before him, sitting on one of the rails and watching him sightlessly in the dark.

They followed the rails like blindmen, the gunslinger leading, the boy following. They slipped their feet along one rail always, also like blindmen. The steady rush of the river off to the right was their companion. They did not speak, and this went on for three periods of waking. The gunslinger felt no urge to think coherently, or to plan. His sleep was dreamless.

During the fourth period of waking and walking, they literally stumbled on a handcar.

The gunslinger ran into it chest-high, and the boy, walking on the other side, struck his forehead and went down with a cry.

The gunslinger made a light immediately. "Are you all right?" The words sounded sharp, almost waspish, and he winced at them.

"Yes." The boy was holding his head gingerly. He shook it once to make sure he had told the truth. They turned to look at what they had run into.

It was a flat square of metal that sat mutely on the tracks. There was a see-saw handle in the center of the square. The gunslinger had no immediate sense of it, but the boy knew immediately.

"It's a handcar."

"What?"

"Handcar," the boy said impatiently, "like in the old movies. Look."

He pulled himself up and went to the handle. He managed to push it down, but it was necessary to hang all his weight on the handle. He grunted briefly. The handcar moved a foot, with silent timelessness, on the rails.

"It works a little hard," the boy said, as if apologizing for it.

The gunslinger pulled himself up and pushed the handle down. The handcar moved forward obediently, then stopped. he could feel a drive-shaft turn beneath his feet. The operation pleased him - it

was the first old machine other than the pump at the way station that he had seen in years which still worked well, but it disquieted him, too. It would take them to their destination that much quicker. The curse-kiss again, he thought, and knew the man in black had meant them to find this, too.

"Neat, huh?" The boy said, and his voice was full of loathing.

"What are movies?" The gunslinger asked again.

Jake still did not answer and they stood in a black silence, like in a tomb where life had fled. The gunslinger could hear his organs at work inside his body and the boy's respiration. That was all.

"You stand on one side. I stand on the other side," Jake said. "You'll have to push by yourself until it gets rolling good. Then I can help. First you push, then I push. We'll go right along. Get it?"

"I get it," the gunslinger said. His hands were in helpless, despairing fists.

"But you'll have to push by yourself until it gets rolling good," the boy repeated, looking at him.

The gunslinger had a sudden vivid picture of the Great Hall a year after the spring Ball, in the shattered, hulked shards of revolt, civil strife, and invasion. It was followed with the memory of Allie, the woman from Tull with the scar, pushed and pulled by the bullets that were killing her in reflex. It was followed by Jamie's face, blue in death, by Susan's, twisted and weeping. All my old friends, the gunslinger thought, and smiled hideously.

"I'll push," the gunslinger said.

He began to push.

They rolled on through the dark, faster now, no longer having to feel their way. Once the awkwardness of a buried age had been run off the handcar, it went smoothly. The boy tried to do his share, and the gunslinger allowed him small shifts – but mostly he pumped by himself, in large and chest-stretching rises and failings. The river was their companion, sometimes closer on their right, sometimes further away. Once it took on huge and thunderous hollowness, as if passing through a prehistoric cathedral narthex. Once the sound of it disappeared almost altogether. The speed and the made wind against their faces seemed to take the place of sight and to put them once again in a frame of time and reference. The gunslinger estimated they were making anywhere from ten to fifteen miles an hour, always on a shallow, almost imperceptible uphill grade that wore him out deceptively. When they stopped he slept like the stone itself. Their food was almost gone again. Neither of them worried about it.

For the gunslinger, the tenseness of a coming climax was as unperceivable but as real and as accretive as the fatigue of propelling the handcar. They were close to the end of the beginning. He felt like a performer placed on center stage minutes before the rise of the curtain; settled in position with his first line held in his mind, he heard the unseen audience rattling programs and settling in seats. He lived with a tight, tidy ball of unholy anticipation in his belly and welcomed the exercise that let him sleep.

The boy spoke less and less; but at their stopping place one sleep-period before they were attacked by the Slow

Mutants, he asked the gunslinger almost shyly about his coming of age.

The gunslinger had been leaning against the handle, a cigarette from his dwindling supply of tobacco clamped in his mouth. He had been on the verge of his usual unthinking sleep when the boy asked his question.

"Why would you want to know that?" He asked.

The boy's voice was curiously stubborn, as if hiding embarrassment. "I just do." And after a pause, he added:

"I always wondered about growing up. It's mostly lies."

"It wasn't growing up," the gunslinger said. "I never grew up all at once. I did it one place and another along the way. I saw a man hung once. That was part of it, though I didn't know it then. I left a girl in a place called King's Town twelve years ago. That was another part. I never knew any of the parts when they happened. Only later I knew that."

He realized with some unease that he was avoiding.

"I suppose the coming of age was part, too," he said, almost grudgingly. "It was formal. Almost stylized; like a dance." He laughed unpleasantly. "Like love.

"Love and dying have been my life."

The boy said nothing.

"It was necessary to prove one's self in battle," the gunslinger began.

Summer and hot.

August had come to the land like a vampire lover, killing the land and the crops of the tenant farmers, turning the fields of the castle-city white and sterile. In the west, some miles distant and near the borders that were the end of the civilized world, fighting had already begun. All reports were bad, and all of them palled before the heat that rested over this place of the center. Cattle lolled

empty-eyed in the pens of the stockyards. Pigs grunted listlessly, unmindful of knives whetted for the coming fall. People whined about taxes and conscription, as they always have; but there was an emptiness beneath the apathetic passion play of politics. The center had frayed like a rag rug that had been washed and walked on and shaken and hung and dried. The lines and nets of mesh which held the last jewel at the breast of the world were unraveling. Things were not holding together. The earth drew in its breath in the summer of the coming eclipse.

The boy idled along the upper corridor of this stone place which was home, sensing these things, not understanding. He was also empty and dangerous.

It had been three years since the hanging of the cook who had always been able to find snacks for hungry boys, and he had filled out. Now, dressed only in faded denim pants, fourteen years old, he had already come to the widened chest-span and lengthening legs that would characterize his manhood. He was still unbedded, but two of the younger slatterns of a West-Town merchant had cast eyes on him. He had felt a response and felt it more strongly now. Even in the coolness of the passage, he felt sweat on his body.

Ahead were his mother's apartments and he approached them incuriously, meaning only to pass them and go upward to the roof, where a thin breeze and the pleasure of his hand awaited.

He had passed the door when a voice called him:

"You. Boy."

It was Marten, the enchanter. He was dressed with a suspicious, upsetting casualness - black whipcord trousers almost as tight as leotards, and a white shirt open halfway down his chest. His hair was tousled.

The boy looked at him silently.

"Come in, come in! Don't stand in the hall! Your mother wants to speak to you." He was smiling with his mouth, but the lines of his face held a deeper, more sardonic humor. Beneath that there was only coldness.

But his mother did not seem to want to see him. She sat in the low-backed chair by the large window in the central parlor of her apartments, the one which overlooked the hot blank stone of the central courtyard. She was dressed in a loose, informal gown and looked at the boy only once - a quick, glinting rueful smile, like autumn sun on stream water. During the rest of the interview she studied her hands.

He saw her seldom now, and the phantom of cradle songs had almost faded from his brain. But she was a beloved stranger. He felt an amorphous fear, and an uncoalesced hatred for Marten, his father's right-hand man (or was it the other way around?), was born.

And, of course, there had already been some back street talk - talk which he honestly thought he hadn't heard.

"Are you well?" She asked him softly, studying her hands. Marten stood beside her, a heavy, disturbing hand near the juncture of her white shoulder and white neck, smiling on them both. His brown eyes were dark to the point of blackness with smiling.

"Yes," he said.

"Your studies go well?"

"I'm trying," he said. They both knew he was not flash ingly intelligent like Cuthbert, or even quick, like Jamie. He was a plodder and a bludgeoner.

"And David?" She knew his affection for the hawk.

The boy looked up at Marten, still smiling paternally down on all this. "Past his prime."

His mother seemed to wince; for a moment Marten's face seemed to darken, his grip on her shoulder tighten.

Then she looked out into the hot whiteness of the day, and all was as it had been.

It's a charade, he thought. A game. Who is playing with whom?

"You have a scar on your forehead," Marten said, still smiling. "Are you going to be a fighter like your father or are you just slow?"

This time she did wince.

"Both," the boy said. He looked steadily at Marten and smiled painfully. Even in here, it was very hot.

Marten stopped smiling abruptly. "You can go to the roof now, boy. I believe you have business there."



But Marten had misunderstood, underestimated. They had been speaking in the low tongue, a parody of informality. But now the boy flashed into High Speech:

"My mother has not yet dismissed me, bondsman!"

Marten's face twisted as if quirt-lashed. The boy heard his mother's dreadful, woeful gasp. She spoke his name.

But the painful smile remained intact on the boy's face and he stepped forward. "Will you give me a sign of fealty, bondsman? In the name of my father whom you serve?"

Marten stared at him, rankly unbelieving.

"Go," Marten said gently. "Go and find your hand."

Smiling, the boy went.

As he closed the door and went back the way he came, he heard his mother wail. It was a banshee sound.

Then he heard Marten's laugh.

The boy continued to smile as he went to his test.

Jamie had come from the shop-wives, and when he saw the boy crossing the exercise yard, he ran to tell Roland the latest gossips of bloodshed and revolt to the west. But he fell aside, the words all unspoken. They had known each other since the time of infancy, and as boys they had dared each other, cuffed each other, and made a thousand explorations of the walls within which they had both been birthed.

The boy strode past him, staring without seeing, grinning his painful grin. He was walking toward Cort's cottage, where the shades were drawn to ward off the savage afternoon heat. Cort napped in the afternoon so that he could enjoy his evening tomcat forays into the mazed and filthy brothels of the lower town to the fullest extent

Jamie knew in a flash of intuition, knew what was to come, and in his fear and ecstasy he was torn between following Roland and going after the others.

Then his hypnotism was broken and he ran toward the main buildings, screaming. "Cuthbert! Allen! Thomas!" His screams sounded puny and thin in the heat. They had known, all of them, in that invisible way boys have, that the boy would be the first of them to try the line. But this was too soon.

The hideous grin on Roland's face galvanized him as no news of wars, revolts, and witchcrafts could have done. This was more than words from a toothless mouth given over fly-specked heads of lettuce.

Roland walked to the cottage of his teacher and kicked the door open. It slammed backward, hit the plain rough plaster of the wall and rebounded.

He had never been here before. The entrance opened on an austere kitchen that was cool and brown.

A table. Two straight chairs. Two cabinets. A faded linoleum floor, tracked in black paths from the cooler set in the floor to the counter where knives hung, to the table.

A public man's privacy here. The last faded sobriety of a violent midnight carouser who had loved the boys of three generations roughly, and made some of them into gunslingers.

"Cort!"

He kicked the table, sending it across the room and into the counter. Knives from the wall rack fell in twinkling jackstraws.

There was thick stirring in the other room, a half-sleep clearing of the throat. The boy did not enter, knowing it was sham, knowing that Cort had awakened immediately in the cottage's other room and stood with one glittering eye beside the door, waiting to break the intruder's un wary neck.

"Cort, I want you, bondsman!"

Now he spoke the High Speech, and Cort swung the door open. He was dressed only in thin underwear shorts, a squat man with bow legs, runneled with scars from top to toe, thick with twists of muscle. There was a round, bulging belly. The boy knew from experience that it was spring steel. The one good eye glared at him from the bashed and dented hairless head.

The boy saluted formally. "Teach me no more, bonds-

''

man. Today I teach you.

"You are early, puler," he said casually, but he also spoke the High Speech. "Five years early, I should judge. I will ask only once. Will you renege?"

The boy only smiled his hideous, painful smile. For Cort, who had seen the smile on a score of bloodied, scarlet-skied fields of honor and dishonor, it was answer enough - perhaps the only answer he would have believed.

"It's too bad," the teacher said absently. "You have been a most promising pupil - the best in two dozen years, I should say. It will be sad to see you broken and set upon a blind path. But the

world has moved on. Bad times are on horseback."

The boy still did not speak (and would have been incapable of any coherent explanation, had it been required), but for the first time the awful smile softened a little.

"Still, there is the line of blood," Cort said somberly, "revolt and witchcraft to the west or no. I am your bondsman, boy. I recognize your command and bow to it now -if never again - with my heart."

And Cort, who had cuffed him, kicked him, bled him, cursed him, made mock of him and called him the very eye of syphilis, bent to one knee and bowed his head.

The boy touched the leathery, vulnerable flesh of his neck with wonder, "Rise, bondsman. In love." Cort stood slowly, and there might have been pain behind the impassive mask of his reamed features. "This is waste. Renege, boy. I break my own oath. Renege, and wait!"

The boy said nothing.

"Very well." Cort's voice became dry and businesslike. "One hour. And the weapon of your choice. "You will bring your stick?"

"I always have."

"How many sticks have been taken from you, Cort?" Which was tantamount to asking: How many boys have entered the square yard beyond the Great Hall and returned as gunslinger apprentices?

"No stick will be taken from me today," Cort said slowly. "I regret it. There is only the once, boy. The penalty for overeagerness is the same as the penalty for unworthiness. Can you not wait?" The boy recalled Marten standing over him, tall as mountains. "No."

"Very well. What weapon do you choose?"

The boy said nothing.

Cort's smile showed a jagged ring of teeth. "Wise enough to begin. In an hour. You realize you will in all probability never see the others, or your father, or this place again?"

"I know what exile means," he said softly.

"Go now."

The boy went, without looking back.

The cellar of the barn was spuriously cool, dank, smelling of cobwebs and earthwater. It was lit from the ubiquitous sun, but felt none of the day's heat; the boy kept the hawk here and the bird seemed comfortable enough.

David was old, now, and no longer hunted the sky. His feathers had lost the radiant animal brightness of three years ago, but the eyes were still as piercing and motionless as ever. You cannot friend a hawk, they said, unless you are a hawk yourself, alone and only a sojourner in the land, without friends or the need of them. The hawk pays no coinage to morals.

David was an old hawk now. The boy hoped (or was he too unimaginative to hope? Did he only know?) that he himself was a young one.

"Hai," he said softly and extended his arm to the tethered perch.

The hawk stepped onto the boy's arm and stood motionless, unhooded. With his other hand the boy reached into his pocket and fished out a bit of dried jerky. The hawk snapped it deftly from between his fingers and made it disappear.

The boy began to stroke David very carefully. Cort most probably would not have believed it if he had seen it, but Cort did not believe the boy's time had come, either.

"I think you die today," he said, continuing to stroke. "I think you will be made sacrifice, like all those little birds we trained you on. Do you remember? No? It doesn't matter. After today, I am the hawk."

David stood on his arm, silent and unblinking, indifferent to his life or death.

"You are old," the boy said reflectively. "And perhaps not my friend. Even a year ago you would have had my eyes instead of that little string of meat, isn't it so? Cort would laugh. But if we get close enough . . . which is it, bird? Age . or friendship?"

David did not say.

The boy hooded him and found the jesses, which were looped at the end of David's perch. They left the barn.

The yard behind the Great Hall was not really a yard at all, but only a green corridor whose walls were formed by tangled, thick-grown hedges. It had been used for the rite of coming of age since time out of mind, long before Cort and his predecessor, who had died of a stab-wound from an overzealous hand in this place. Many boys had left the corridor from the east end, where the teacher always entered, as men. The east end faced the Great Hall and all the civilization and intrigue of the lighted world. Many more had slunk away, beaten and bloody, from the west end, where the boys always entered, as boys forever. The west end faced the mountains and the hut-

dwellers; beyond that, the tangled barbarian forests; and beyond that the desert. The boy who became a man progressed from darkness and unlearning to light and responsibility. The boy who was beaten could only retreat, forever and forever. The hallway was as smooth and green as a gaming field. It was exactly fifty yards long.

Each end was usually clogged with tense spectators and relatives, for the ritual was usually forecast with great accuracy – eighteen was the most common age (those who had not made their test by the age of twenty-five usually slipped into obscurity as freeholders, unable to face the brutal all-or-nothing fact of the field and the test). But on this day there were none but Jamie, Cuthbert, Allen, and Thomas. They clustered at the boy's end, gape-mouthed and frankly terrified.

"Your weapon, stupid!" Cuthbert hissed, in agony. "You forgot your weapon!"

"I have it," the boy said distantly. Dimly he wondered if the news of this had reached yet to the central buildings, to his mother – and Marten. His father was on a hunt, not due back for weeks. In this he felt a sense of shame, for he felt that in his father he would have found understanding, if not approval. "Has Cort come?"

"Cort is here." The voice came from the far end of the corridor, and Cort stepped into view, dressed in a short singlet. A heavy leather band encircled his forehead to keep sweat from his eyes. He held an ironwood stick in one hand, sharp on one end, heavily blunted and spatulate on the other. He began the litany which all of them, chosen by the blind blood of their fathers, had known since early childhood, learned against the day when they would, perchance, become men.

"Have you come here for a serious purpose, boy?"

"I have come for a serious purpose, teacher."

"Have you come as an outcast from your father's house?"

"I have so come, teacher." And would remain outcast until he had bested Cort. If Cort bested him, he would remain outcast forever.

"Have you come with your chosen weapon?"

"I have so come, teacher."

"What is your weapon?" This was the teacher's advantage, his chance to adjust his plan of battle to the sling or the spear or the net.

"My weapon is David, teacher."

Cort halted only briefly.

"So then have you at me, boy?"

"I do."

"Be swift, then."

And Cort advanced into the corridor, switching his pike from one hand to the other. The boys sighed flutteringly, like birds, as their compatriot stepped to meet him.

My weapon is David, teacher.

Did Cort remember? Had he fully understood? If so, perhaps it was all lost. It turned on surprise – and on whatever stuff the hawk had left in him. Would he only sit, disinterested, on the boy's arm, while Cort struck him brainless with the ironwood? Or seek the high, hot sky?

They drew close together, and the boy loosened the hawk's hood with nerveless fingers. It dropped to the green grass, and the boy halted in his tracks. He saw Cort's eyes drop to the bird and widen with surprise and slow-dawning comprehension.

Now, then.

"At him!" The boy cried and raised his arm.

And David flew like a silent brown bullet, stubby wings pumping once, twice, three times, before crashing into Cort's face, talons and beak searching.

"Hai! Roland!" Cuthbert screamed deliriously.

Cort staggered backwards, off balance. The ironwood staff rose and beat futilely at the air about his head. The hawk was an undulating, blurred bundle of feathers.

The boy arrowed forward, his hand held out in a straight wedge, his elbow locked.

Still, Cort was almost too quick for him. The bird had covered ninety percent of his vision, but the ironwood came up again, spatulate end forward, and Cort cold bloodily performed the only action that could turn events at that point. He beat his own face three times, biceps flexing mercilessly.

David fell away, broken and twisted. One wing flapped at the ground frantically. His cold, predator's eyes stared fiercely into the teacher's bloody, streaming face. Cort's bad eye now bulged blindly from its socket.

The boy delivered a kick to Cort's temple, connecting solidly. It should have ended it; his leg had been numbed by Cort's only blow, but it still should have ended it. It did not. For a moment Cort's face went slack, and then he lunged, grabbing for the boy's foot.

The boy skipped back and tripped over his own feet. He went down asprawl. He heard, from far away the sound of Jamie's scream.

Cort was up, ready to fall on him and finish it. He had lost his advantage. For a moment they looked at each other, the teacher standing over the pupil, with gouts of blood pouring from the left side of his face, the bad eye now closed except for a thin slit of white. There would be no brothels for Cort this night.

Something ripped jaggedly at the boy's hand. It was the hawk, David, tearing blindly. Both wings were broken. It was incredible that he still lived.

The boy grabbed him like a stone, unmindful of the jabbing, diving beak that was taking the flesh from his wrist in ribbons. As Cort flew at him, all spread-eagled, the boy threw the hawk upward.

"Hai! David! Kill!"

Then Cort blotted out the sun and came down atop of him.

The bird was smashed between them, and the boy felt a calloused thumb probe for the socket of his eye. He turned it, at the same time bringing up the slab of his thigh to block Cort's crotch-seeking knee. His own hand flailed against the tree of Cort's neck in three hard chops. It was like hitting ribbed stone.

Then Cort made a thick grunting. His body shuddered. Faintly, the boy saw one hand flailing for the dropped stick, and with a jackknifing lunge, he kicked it out of reach. David had hooked one talon into Cort's right ear. The other battered mercilessly at the teacher's cheek, making it a ruin. Warm blood splattered the boy's face, smelling of sheared copper.

Cort's fist struck the bird once, breaking it's back. Again, and the neck snapped away at a crooked angle. And still the talon clutched. There was no ear now; only a red hole tunneled into the side of Cort's skull. The third blow sent the bird flying, clearing Cort's face.

The boy brought the edge of his hand across the bridge of Cort's nose, breaking the thin bone. Blood sprayed.

Cort's grasping, unseeing hand ripped at the boy's buttocks and Roland rolled away blindly, finding Cort's stick, rising to his knees.

Cort came to his own knees, grinning. His face was curtained with gore. The one seeing eye rolled madly in its socket. The nose was smashed over to a haunted, leaning angle. Both cheeks hung in flaps.

The boy held his stick like a baseball player waiting for the pitch.

Cort double-fainted, then came directly at him.

The boy was ready. The ironwood swung in a flat arc, striking Cort's skull with a dull thudding noise. Cort fell on his side, looking at the boy with a lazy unseeing expression. A tiny trickle of spit came from his mouth.

"Yield or die," the boy said. His mouth was filled with wet cotton.

And Cort smiled. Nearly all consciousness was gone, and he would remain tended in his cottage for a week afterward, wrapped in the blackness of coma, but now he held on with all the strength of his pitiless, shadowless life.

"I yield, gunslinger. I yield smiling."

Cort's clear eye closed.

The gunslinger shook him gently, but with persistence. The others were around him now, their hands trembling to thump his back and hoist him to their shoulders; but they held back, afraid, sensing a new gulf. Yet it was not as strange as it could have been, because there had always been a gulf between this one and the rest.

Cort's eye fluttered open again, weakly.

"The key," the gunslinger said. "My birthright, teacher. I need it."

His birthright was the guns - not the heavy ones of his father, weighted with sandalwood - but guns, all the same. Forbidden to all but a few. The ultimate, the final weapon. In the heavy vault under the barracks where he by ancient law was now required to abide, away from his mother's breast, hung his apprentice weapons, heavy cumbersome things of steel and nickel. Yet they had seen his father through his apprenticeship, and his father now ruled at least in name.

"Is it so fearsome, then?" Cort muttered, as if in his sleep. "So pressing? I feared so. And yet you won."

"The key."

"The hawk . . . a fine ploy. A fine weapon. How long did it take you to train the bastard?"

"I never trained David. I friended him. The key."

"Under my belt, gunslinger." The eye closed again.

The gunslinger reached under Cort's belt, feeling the heavy press of his belly, the huge muscles there now slack and asleep. The key was on a brass ring. He clutched it in his hand, restraining the mad urge to thrust it up to the sky in a salutation of victory.

He got to his feet and was finally turning to the others when Cort's hand fumbled for his foot. For a moment the gunslinger feared some last attack and tensed, but Cort only looked up at him and beckoned with one crusted finger.

"I'm going to sleep now," Cort whispered calmly. "Perhaps forever, I don't know. I teach you no more, gunslinger. You have surpassed me, and two years younger than your father, who was the youngest. But let me counsel."

"What?" Impatiently.

"Wait."

"Huh?" The word was startled out of him.

"Let the word and the legend go before you. There are those who will carry both." His eyes flicked over the gunslinger's shoulder. "Fools, perchance. Let the word go before you. Let your shadow grow. Let it grow hair on its face. Let it become dark." He smiled grotesquely. "Given time, words may even enchant an enchanter. Do you take my meaning, gunslinger?"

"Yes."

"Will you take my last counsel?"

The gunslinger rocked back on his heels, a hunkered, thinking posture that foreshadowed the man. He looked at the sky. It was deepening, purpling. The heat of the day was failing and thunderheads in the west foretold rain. Lightning tines jabbed the placid flank of the rising foot hills miles distant. Beyond that, the mountains. Beyond that, the rising fountains of blood and unreason. He was tired, tired into his bones and beyond.

He looked back at Cort. "I will bury my hawk tonight, teacher. And later go into lower town to inform those in the brothels that will wonder about you."

Cort's lips parted in a pained smile. And then he slept.

The gunslinger got to his feet and turned to the others. "Make a litter and take him to his house. Then bring a nurse. No, two nurses. Okay?"

They still watched him, caught in a bated moment that was not yet able to be broken. They still looked for a corona of fire, or a werewolf change of features.

"Two nurses," the gunslinger repeated, and then smiled. They smiled.

"You god-damned horse drover!" Cuthbert suddenly yelled, grinning. "You haven't left enough meat for the rest of us to pick off the bone!"

"The world won't move on tomorrow," the gunslinger said, quoting the old adage with a smile.

"Allen, you butter ass. Move your freight"

Allen set about making the litter; Thomas and Jamie went together to the main hall and the infirmary.

The gunslinger and Cuthbert looked at each other. They had always been the closest - or as close as they could be under the particular shades of their characters. There was a speculative, open light in Cuthbert's eyes, and the gunslinger controlled only with great difficulty the need to tell him not to call for the test for a year or even eighteen months, lest he go west. But they had been through a great deal together, and the gunslinger did not feel he could risk it without an expression that might be taken for patronization. I've begun to scheme, he thought, and was a little dismayed. Then he thought of Marten, of his mother, and he smiled a deceiver's smile at his friend.

I am to be the first, he thought, knowing it for the first time, although he had thought of it (in a bemused way) many times before. I am to be first

"Let's go," he said.

"With pleasure, gunslinger."

They left by the east end of the hedge-bordered corridor; Thomas and Jamie were returning with the nurses already. They looked like ghosts in their heavy white robes, crossed at the breast with red.

"Shall I help you with the hawk?" Cuthbert asked.

"Yes," the gunslinger said.

And later, when darkness had come and the rushing thundershowers with it; while huge, phantom caissons rolled across the sky and lightning washed the crooked streets of the lower town in blue fire; while horses stood at hitching rails with their heads down and their tails drooping, the gunslinger took a woman and lay with her.

It was quick and good. When it was over and they lay side by side without speaking, it began to hail with a brief, rattling ferocity. Downstairs and far away, someone was playing Hey Jude ragtime. The gunslinger's mind turned reflectively inward. It was in that hail-splattered silence, just before sleep overtook him, that he first thought that he might also be the last.

The gunslinger did not, of course, tell the boy all of this, but perhaps most of it had come

through anyway. He had already realized that this was an extremely perceptive boy, not so different from Cuthbert, or even Jamie.

"You asleep?" the gunslinger asked.

"No."

"Did you understand what I told you?"

"Understand it?" The boy asked, with cautious scorn. "Understand it? Are you kidding?"

"No." But the gunslinger felt defensive. He had never told anyone about his coming of age before, because he felt ambivalent about it. Of course, the hawk had been a perfectly acceptable weapon, yet it had been a trick, too. And a betrayal. The first of many: Am I readying to throw this boy at the man in black?

"I understood it," the boy said. "It was a game, wasn't it? Do grown men always have to play games? Does everything have to be an excuse for another kind of game? Do any men grow up or do they only come of age?"

"You don't know everything," the gunslinger said, trying to hold his slow anger.

"No. But I know what I am to you."

"And what is that?" The gunslinger asked tightly.

"A poker chip."

The gunslinger felt an urge to find a rock and brain the boy. Instead, he held his tongue.

"Go to sleep," he said. "Boys need their sleep."

And in his mind he heard Marten's echo: Go and find your hand.

He sat stiffly in the darkness, stunned with horror and terrified (for the first time in his existence; of anything) of the self-loathing that might come.

During the next period of waking, the railway angled closer to the underground river, and they came upon the Slow Mutants.

Jake saw the first one and screamed aloud.

The gunslinger's head, which had been fixed straight forward as he pumped the handcar, jerked to the right. There was a rotten jack-o-lantern greenness below and away from them, circular and pulsating faintly. For the first time he became aware of odor - faint, unpleasant, wet.

The greenness was a face, and the face was abnormal. Above the flattened nose was an insectile node of eyes, looking at them expressionlessly. The gunslinger felt an atavistic crawl in his intestines and privates. He stepped up the rhythm of arms and handcar handle slightly.

The glowing face faded.

"What was it?" the boy asked, crawling. "What - "The words stopped dumb in his throat as they came up upon and passed a group of three faintly glowing forms, standing between the rails and the invisible river, watching them, motionless.

"They're Slow Mutants," the gunslinger said. "I don't

think they'll bother us. They're probably just as frightened of us as we are of - "

One of the forms broke free and shambled toward them, glowing and changing. The face was that of a starving idiot. The faint naked body had been transformed into a knotted mess of tentacular limbs with suckers.

The boy screamed again and crowded against the gunslinger's leg like an affrighted dog.

One of the tentacles pawed across the flat platform of the handcar. It reeked of the wet and the dark and of strangeness. The gunslinger let loose of the handle and drew. He put a bullet through the forehead of the starving idiot face. It fell away, its faint swamp-fire glow fading, an eclipsed moon. The gunflash lay bright and branded on their dark retinas, fading only reluctantly. The smell of expended powder was hot and savage and alien in this buried place.

There were others, more of them. None moved against them overtly, but they were closing in on the tracks, a silent, hideous party of rubberneekers.

"You may have to pump for me," the gunslinger said. "Can you?"

"Yes."

"Then be ready."

The boy stood close to him, his body poised. His eyes took in the Slow Mutants only as they passed, not traversing, not seeing more than they had to. The boy assumed a psychic bulge of terror, as if his very id had somehow sprung out through his pores to form a telepathic shield. The gunslinger pumped steadily but did not increase his speed. The Slow Mutants could smell their terror, he knew that, but he doubted if terror would be enough for them. He and the boy were, after all, creatures of the light, and whole. How they must hate us, he thought, and wondered if they had hated the man in black in the same way.

He thought not, or perhaps he had passed among them and through their pitiful hive colony unknown, only the shadow of a dark wing.

The boy made a noise in his throat and the gunslinger turned his head almost casually. Four of them were charging the handcar in a stumbling way – one of them in the process of finding a handgrip.

The gunslinger let go of the handle and drew again, with the same sleepy casual motion. He shot the lead mutant in the head. The mutant made a sighing, sobbing noise and began to grin. Its hands were limp and fishlike, dead; the fingers clove to one another like the fingers of a glove long immersed in drying mud. One of these corpse-hands found the boy's foot and began to pull.

The boy shrieked aloud in the granite womb.

The gunslinger shot the mutant in the chest. It began to slobber through the grin. Jake was going off the side. The gunslinger caught one of his arms and was almost pulled off balance himself. The thing was amazingly strong. The gunslinger put another bullet in the mutant's head. One eye went out like a candle. Still it pulled. They engaged in a silent tug of war for Jake's jerking, wriggling body. They yanked on him like a wishbone.

The handcar was slowing down. The others began to close in – the lame, the halt, the blind. Perhaps they only looked for a Jesus to heal them, to raise them Lazarus-like from the darkness. It's the end for the boy, the gunslinger thought with perfect coldness. This is the end he meant. Let go and pump or hold on and be buried. The end for the boy.

He gave a tremendous yank on the boy's arm and shot the mutant in the belly. For one frozen moment its grip grew even tighter and Jake began to slide off the edge again. Then the dead mud-hands loosened, and the Slow Mutie fell on its face between the tracks behind the slowing handcar, still grinning.

"I thought you'd leave me," the boy was sobbing. "I thought . . . I thought. . ."

"Hold onto my belt," the gunslinger said. "Hold on just as tight as you can."

The hand worked into his belt and clutched there; the boy was breathing in great convulsive, silent gasps.

The gunslinger began to pump steadily again, and the handcar picked up speed. The Slow Mutants fell back a step and watched them go with faces hardly human (or pathetically so), faces that generated the weak phosphorescence common to those weird deep-sea fishes that live under incredible black pressure, faces that held no anger or hate on their senseless orbs, but only what seemed to be a semiconscious, idiot regret.

"They're thinning," the gunslinger said. The drawn-up muscles of his lower belly and privates relaxed the smallest bit. "They're –"

The Slow Mutants had put rocks across the track. The way was blocked. It had been a quick, poor job, perhaps the work of only a minute to clear, but they were stopped. And someone would have to get down and move them. The boy moaned and shuddered closer to the gunslinger. The gunslinger let go of the handle and the handcar coasted noiselessly to the rocks, where it thumped to rest.

The Slow Mutants began to close in again, almost casually, almost as if they had been passing by, lost in a dream of darkness, and had found someone of whom to ask directions. A street-corner congregation of the damned beneath the ancient rock.

"Are they going to get us?" The boy asked calmly.

"No. Be quiet a second."

He looked at the rocks. The mutants were weak, of course, and had not been able to drag any of the boulders to block their way. Only small rocks. Only enough to stop them, to make someone get down.

"Get down," the gunslinger said. "You'll have to move them. I'll cover you."

"No," the boy whispered. "Please."

"I can't give you a gun and I can't move the rocks and shoot too. You have to get down."

Jake's eyes rolled terribly; for a moment his body shuddered in tune with the turnings of his mind, and then he wriggled over the side and began to throw rocks to the right and the left madly, not looking.

The gunslinger drew and waited.

Two of them, lurching rather than walking, went for the boy with arms like dough. The guns did their work, stitching the darkness with red-white lances of light that pushed needles of pain into the gunslinger's eyes. The boy screamed and continued to throw away rocks. Witch-glow leaped and danced. Hard to see, now, that was the worst. Everything had gone to shadows.

One of them, glowing hardly at all, suddenly reached for the boy with rubber boogeyman arms. Eyes that ate up half the mutie's head rolled wetly.

Jake screamed again and turned to struggle.

The gunslinger fired without allowing himself to think, before his spotty vision could betray his hands into a terrible quiver; the two heads were only inches apart. It was the mutie who fell, slitheringly.

Jake threw rocks wildly. The mutants milled just outside the invisible line of trespass, closing a

little at a time, now very close. Others had caught up, swelling their number.

"All right," the gunslinger said. "Get on. Quick."

When the boy moved, the mutants came at them. Jake

was over the side and scrambling to his feet; the gunslinger was already pumping again, all out.

Both guns were holstered now. They must run.

Strange hands slapped the metal plane of the car's surface. The boy was holding his belt with both hands now, his face pressed tightly into the small of the gunslinger's back.

A group of them ran onto the tracks, their faces full of that mindless, casual anticipation. The gunslinger was pumped full of adrenalin; the car was flying along the tracks into the darkness.

They struck the four or five pitiful hulks full force. They flew like rotten bananas struck from the stem.

On and on, into the soundless, flying, banshee darkness.

After an age, the boy raised his face into the made wind, dreading and yet needing to know. The ghost of gun-flashes still lingered on his retinas. There was nothing to see but the darkness and nothing to hear but the rumble of the river.

"They're gone," the boy said, suddenly fearing an end to the tracks in the darkness, and the wounding crash as they jumped the rails and plunged to twisted ruin. He had ridden in cars; once his humorless father had driven at ninety on the New Jersey Turnpike and had been stopped. But he had never ridden like this, with the wind and the blindness and the terrors behind and ahead, with the sound of the river like a chuckling voice – the voice of the man in black. The gunslinger's arms were pistons in a lunatic human factory.

"They're gone," the boy said timidly, the words ripped from his mouth by the wind. "You can slow down now. We left them behind."

But the gunslinger did not hear. They careened onward into the strange dark.

They went on three periods of waking and sleeping without incident.

During the fourth period of waking (halfway through? three-quarters? they didn't know – only that they weren't tired enough yet to stop) there was a sharp thump beneath them, the handcar swayed, and their bodies immediately leaned to the right with gravity as the rails took a gradual turn to the left.

There was a light ahead – a glow so faint and alien that it seemed at first to be a totally new element, neither earth, air, fire, or water. It had no color and could only be discerned by the fact that they had regained their hands and faces in a dimension beyond that of touch. Their eyes had become so light-sensitive that they noticed the glow over five miles before they approached it.

"The end," the boy said tightly. "It's the end."

"No." The gunslinger spoke with odd assurance. "It isn't."

And it was not. They reached light but not day.

As they approached the source of the glow, they saw for the first time that the rock wall to the left had fallen away and their tracks had been joined by others which crossed in a complex spider web. The light laid them in burnished vectors. On some of them there were dark boxcars, passenger coaches, a stage that had been adapted to rails. They made the gunslinger nervous, like ghost galleons trapped in an underground Sargasso.

The light grew stronger, hurting their eyes a little, but growing slowly enough to allow them to adapt. They came from dark to light like divers coming up from deep fathoms in slow stages.

Ahead, drawing nearer, was a huge hangar stretching up into the dark. Cut into it, showing yellow squares of

light, were a series of perhaps twenty-four entranceways, growing from the size of toy windows to a height of twenty feet as they drew closer. They passed inside through one of the middle ways.

Written above were a series of characters, in various languages, the gunslinger presumed. He was astounded to find that he could read the last one; it was an ancient root of the High Speech itself and said:

TRACK 10 TO SURFACE AND POINTS WEST

The light inside was brighter; the tracks met and merged through a series of switchings. Here some of the traffic lanterns still worked, flashing eternal reds and greens and ambers.

They rolled between rising stone piers caked black with the passage of thousands of vehicles, and then they were in some kind of central terminal. The gunslinger let the hand-car coast slowly to a stop, and they peered around.

"It's like the subway," the boy said.

"Subway?"

"Never mind."



The boy climbed up and onto the hard cement. They looked at silent, deserted booths where newspapers and books had once been vended; an ancient bootery; a weapon shop (the gunslinger, with a sudden burst of excitement, saw revolvers and rifles; closer inspection showed that their barrels had been filled with lead; he did, however, pick out a bow, which he slung over his back, and a quiver of almost useless, badly weighted arrows); a women's apparel shop. Somewhere a converter was turning the air over and over, as it had for thousands of years – but perhaps not for much longer. It had a grating noise somewhere in the middle of its cycle which served to remind that perpetual motion, even under strictly controlled conditions, is still a fool's dream. The air had a mechanized taste. Their shoes made flat echoes.

The boy cried out: "Hey! Hey...."

The gunslinger turned around and went to him. The boy was standing, transfixed, at the book stall. Inside, sprawled in the far corner, was a mummy. The mummy was wearing a blue uniform with gold piping – a trainman's uniform by the look. There was an ancient, perfectly preserved newspaper on the mummy's lap, which crumbled to dust when the gunslinger attempted to look at it. The mummy's face was like an old, shriveled apple. Cautiously, the gunslinger touched the cheek. There was a small puff of dust, and they looked through the cheek and into the mummy's mouth. A gold tooth twinkled.

"Gas," the gunslinger murmured. "They used to be able to make a gas that would do this."

"They fought wars with it," the boy said darkly.

"Yes."

There were other mummies, not a great many, but a few. They were all wearing blue and gold ornamental uniforms. The gunslinger supposed that the gas had been used when the place was empty of all incoming and outgoing traffic. Perhaps, in some dim day, the station had been a military objective of some long-gone army and cause.

The thought depressed him.

"We had better go on," he said, and started toward Track 10 and the handcar again. But the boy stood rebelliously behind him.

"Not going."

The gunslinger turned back, surprised.

The boy's face was twisted and trembling. "You won't get what you want until I'm dead. I'll take my chances by myself."

The gunslinger nodded noncommittally, hating himself. "Okay." He turned around and walked across to the stone piers and leaped easily down onto the handcar.

"You made a deal!" The boy screamed after him. "I know you did!"

The gunslinger, not replying, carefully put the bow in front of the T-post rising out of the handcar's floor, out of harm's way.

The boy's fists were clenched, his features drawn in agony.

How easily you bluff this young boy, the gunslinger told himself dryly. Again and again his intuition has led him to this point, and again and again you have led him on by the nose – after all, he has no friends but you.

In a sudden, simple thought (almost a vision) it came to him that all he had to do was give it over, turn around, take the boy with him, make him the center of a new force. The Tower did not have to be obtained in this humiliating, nose-rubbing way. Let it come after the boy had a growth of years, when the two of them could cast the man in black aside like a cheap wind-up toy.

Surely, he thought cynically. Surely.

He knew with sudden coldness that going backward would mean death for both of them – death or worse: entombment with the living dead behind them. Decay of all the faculties. With, perhaps, the guns of his father living long after both of them, kept in rotten splendor as totems not unlike the unforgotten gas pump.

Show some guts, he told himself falsely.

He reached for the handle and began to pump it. The handcar moved away from the stone piers.

The boy screamed: "Wait!" And began running on the diagonal, toward where the handcar would emerge toward the darkness ahead. The gunslinger had an impulse to speed up, to leave the boy alone yet at least with an uncertainty.

Instead, he caught him as he leaped. The heart beneath

the thin shirt thrummed and fluttered as Jake clung to him. It was like the beat of a chicken's heart.

It was very close now.

The sound of the river had become very loud, filling even their dreams with its steady thunder. The gunslinger, more as a whim than anything else, let the boy pump them ahead while he shot a

number of arrows into the dark, tethered by fine white lengths of thread. The bow was very bad, incredibly preserved but with a terrible pull and aim despite that, and the gunslinger knew that very little would improve it. Even re-stringing would not help the tired wood. The arrows would not fly far into the dark, but the last one he sent out came back wet and slick. The gunslinger only shrugged when the boy asked him how far, but privately he didn't think the arrow could have traveled more than a hundred yards from the rotted bow – and lucky to get that.

And still the sound grew louder.

During the third waking period after the station, a spectral radiance began to grow again. They had entered a long tunnel of some weird phosphorescent rock, and the wet walls glittered and twinkled with thousands of minute starbursts. They saw things in a kind of eerie, horror-house surreality.

The brute sound of the river was channeled to them by the confining rock, magnified in its own natural amplifier. Yet the sound remained oddly constant, even as they approached the crossing point the gunslinger was sure lay ahead, because the walls were widening, drawing back. The angle of their ascent became more pronounced.

The tracks arched straight ahead in the new light. To the gunslinger they looked like the captive tubes of swamp gas sometimes sold for a pretty at the Feast of Joseph fair-time; to the boy they looked like endless streamers of neon tubing. But in its glow they could both see that the rock that had enclosed them so long ended up ahead in ragged twin peninsulas that pointed toward a gulf of darkness ahead –the chasm over the river.

The tracks continued out and over the unknowable drop, supported by a trestle aeons old. And beyond, what seemed an incredible distance, was a tiny pinprick of light; not phosphorescence or fluorescence, but the hard, true light of day. It was as tiny as a needle-prick in a dark cloth, yet weighted with frightful meaning.

"Stop," the boy said. "Stop for a minute. Please."

Unquestioning, the gunslinger let the handcar coast to a rest. The sound of the river was a steady, booming roar, coming from beneath and ahead. The artificial glow from the wet rock was suddenly hateful. For the first time he felt a claustrophobic hand touch him, and the urge to get out, to get free of this living burial, was strong and nearly undeniable.

"We'll go through," the boy said. "Is that what he wants? For us to drive the handcar out over . . . that . . . and fall down?"

The gunslinger knew it was not but said: "I don't know what he wants."

"We're close now. Can't we walk?"

They got down and approached the lip of the drop carefully. The stone beneath their feet continued to rise until, with a sudden, angling drop, the floor fell away from the tracks and the tracks continued alone, across blackness.

The gunslinger dropped to his knees and peered down. He could dimly make out a complex, nearly incredible webwork of steel girders and struts, disappearing down toward the roar of the river, all in support of the graceful arch of the tracks across the void. In his mind's eye he could imagine the work of time and water on the steel, in deadly tandem. How much support was left? Little? Hardly any? None? He suddenly saw the face of the mummy again, and the way the flesh, seemingly solid, had crumbled effortlessly to powder at the bare touch of his finger.

"We'll walk," the gunslinger said.

He half expected the boy to balk again, but he preceded the gunslinger calmly out onto the rails, crossing on the welded steel slats calmly, with sure feet. The gunslinger followed him, ready to catch him if Jake should put foot wrong.

They left the handcar behind them and walked precariously out over darkness.

The gunslinger felt a fine slick of sweat cover his skin. The trestle was rotten, very rotten. It thrummed beneath his feet with the heady motion of the river far beneath, swaying a little on unseen guy wires. We're acrobats, he thought. Look, mother, no net. I'm flying. He knelt once and examined the crossties they were walking on. They were caked and pitted with rust (he could feel the reason on his face; fresh air, the friend of corruption: very close to the surface now), and a strong blow of the fist made the metal quiver sickly. Once he heard a warning groan beneath his feet and felt the steel settle preparatory to giving way, but he had already moved on.

The boy, of course, was over a hundred pounds lighter and safe enough, unless the going became progressively worse.

Behind them, the handcar had melted into the general gloom. The stone pier on the left extended out perhaps twenty feet. Further than the one on the right, but this was also left behind and they

were alone over the gulf.

At first it seemed that the tiny prick of daylight remained mockingly constant (perhaps drawing away from them at the exact pace they approached it – that would be wonderful magic indeed), but gradually the gunslinger realized that it was widening, becoming more defined. They were still below it, but the tracks were still rising.

The boy gave a surprised grunt and suddenly lurched to the side, arms pinwheeling in slow, wide revolutions. It seemed that he tottered on the brink for a very long time indeed before stepping forward again.

"It almost went on me," he said softly, without emotion. "Step over."

The gunslinger did so. The crosstie the boy had stepped on had given way almost entirely and flopped downward lazily, swinging easily on a disintegrating rivet, like a shutter on a haunted window.

Upward, still upward. It was a nightmare walk and so seemed to go on much longer than it did; the air itself seemed to thicken and become like taffy, and the gunslinger felt as if he might be swimming rather than walking. Again and again his mind tried to turn itself to thoughtful, lunatic consideration of the awful space between this trestle and the river below. His brain viewed it in spectacular detail, and how it would be: The scream of twisting metal, the lurch as his body slid off to the side, the grabbing for nonexistent handholds with the fingers, the swift rattle of bootheels on treacherous, rotted steel – and then down, turning over and over, the warm spray in his crotch as his bladder let go, the rush of wind against his face, rippling his hair up in cartoon fright, pulling his eyelids back, the dark water rushing to meet him, faster, outstripping even his own scream –

Metal screamed beneath him and he stepped past it unhurriedly, shifting his weight, not thinking of the drop, or of how far they had come, or of how far was left. Not thinking that the boy was expendable and that the sale of his honor was now, at last, nearly negotiated.

"Three ties out here," the boy said coolly. "I'm going to jump. Here! Here!"

The gunslinger saw him silhouetted for a moment against the daylight, an awkward, hunched spread-eagle. He landed and the whole edifice swayed drunkenly. Metal beneath them protested and something far below fell, first with a crash, then with the sound of deep water.

"Are you over?" The gunslinger asked.

"Yes," the boy said remotely, "but it's very rotten. I don't think it will hold you. Me, but not you. Go back now. Go back now and leave me alone."

His voice was hysterical, cold but hysterical.

The gunslinger stepped over the break. One large step did it. The boy was shuddering helplessly.

"Go back. I don't want you to kill me."

"For Christ's sake, walk," the gunslinger said roughly. "It's going to fall down."

The boy walked drunkenly now, his hands held out shudderingly before him, fingers splayed.

They went up.

Yes, it was much more rotten now. There were frequent breaks of one, two, even three ties, and the gunslinger expected again and again that they would find the long empty space between rails that would either force them back or make them walk on the rails themselves, balanced giddily over the chasm.

He kept his eyes fixed on the daylight.

The glow had taken on a color – blue – and as it came closer it became softer, paling the radiance of the phosphor

as it mixed with it. Fifty yards or a hundred? He could not say.

They walked, and now he looked at his feet, crossing from tie to tie. When he looked again, the glow had grown to a hole, and it was not a light but a way out. They were almost there.

Thirty yards, yes. Ninety short feet. It could be done. Perhaps they would have the man in black yet. Perhaps, in the bright sunlight the evil flowers in his mind would shrivel and anything would be possible.

The sunlight was blocked out.

He looked up, startled, staring, and saw a silhouette filling the light, eating it up, allowing only chinks of mocking blue around the outline of shoulders, the fork of crotch.

"Hello, boys!"

The man in black's voice echoed to them, amplified in this natural throat of stone, the sarcasm taking on mighty overtones. Blindly, the gunslinger sought the jawbone, but it was gone, lost somewhere, used up.

He laughed above them and the sound crashed around them, reverberating like surf in a filling cave. The boy screamed and tottered, a windmill again, arms gyrating through the scant air.

Metal ripped and sloughed beneath them; the rails canted through a slow and dreamy twisting. The

boy plunged, and one hand flew up like a gull in the darkness, up, up, and then he hung over the pit; he dangled there, his dark eyes staring up at the gunslinger in final blind lost knowledge.

"Help me."

Booming, racketing: "Come now, gunslinger. Or catch me never!"

All chips on the table. Every card up but one. The boy dangled, a living Tarot card, the hanged man, the Phoenician sailor, innocent lost and barely above the wave of a stygian sea.

Wait then, wait awhile.

"Do I go?" The voice so loud, he makes it hard to think, the power to cloud men's minds. . . .

Don't make it bad, take a sad song and make it better. . . . "Help me."

The trestle had begun to twist further, screaming, pulling loose from itself, giving -"Then I shall leave you."

"No!"

His legs carried him in a sudden leap through the entropy that held him, above the dangling boy, into a skidding, plunging rush toward the light that offered, the Tower frozen on the retina of his mind's eye in a black frieze, suddenly silence, the silhouette gone, even the beat of his heart gone as the trestle settled further, beginning its final slow dance to the depths, tearing loose, his hand finding the rocky, lighted lip of damnation; and behind him, in the dreadful silence, the boy spoke from too far beneath him.

"Go then. There are other worlds than these."

It tore away from him, the whole weight of it; and as he pulled himself up and through to the light and the breeze and the reality of a new karma (we all shine on), he twisted his head back, for a moment in his agony striving to be Janus- but there was nothing, only plummeting silence, for the boy made no sound.

Then he was up, pulling his legs through onto the rocky escarpment that looked toward a grassy plain at the descending foot, toward where the man in black stood spread-legged, with arms crossed.

The gunslinger stood drunkenly, pallid as a ghost, eyes huge and swimming beneath his forehead, shirt smeared with the white dust of his final, lunging crawl. It came to him that he would always flee murder. It came to him that there would be further degradations of the spirit ahead that might make this one seem infinitesimal, and yet he would still flee it, down corridors and through cities, from bed to bed; he would flee the boy's face and try to bury it in cunts or even in further destruction, only to enter one final room and find it looking at him over a candle flame. He had become the boy; the boy had become him. He was a wurdalak, lycanthropus of his own making, and in deep dreams he would become the boy and speak strange tongues.

This is death. Is it? Is it?

He walked slowly, drunkenly down the rocky hill toward where the man in black waited. Here the tracks had been worn away, under the sun of reason, and it was as if they had never been.

The man in black pushed his hood away with the backs of both hands, laughing.

"So!" he cried. "Not an end, but the end of the beginning, eh? You progress, gunslinger! You progress! Oh, how I admire you!"

The gunslinger drew with blinding speed and fired twelve times. The gun-flashes dimmed the sun itself, and the pounding of the explosions slammed back from the rock-faced escarpments behind them.

"Now," the man in black said, laughing. "Oh, now. We make great magic together, you and I. You kill me no more than you kill yourself."

He withdrew, walking backwards, facing the gunslinger, grinning. "Come. Come. Come."

The gunslinger followed him in broken boots to the place of counseling.

## THE GUNSLINGER AND THE DARKMAN

The man in black led him to an ancient killing ground to make palaver. The gunslinger knew it immediately; a Golgotha, place-of-the-skull. And bleached skulls stared blandly up at them - cattle, coyotes, deer, rabbits. Here the alabaster xylophone of a hen pheasant killed as she fed; there the tiny, delicate bones of a mole, perhaps killed for pleasure by a wild dog.

The Golgotha was a bowl indented into the descending slope of the mountain, and below, in easier altitudes, the gunslinger could see Joshua trees and scrub firs. The sky overhead was a softer blue than he had seen for a twelve-month, and there was an indefinable something that spoke of the

sea in the not-too-great distance.

Jam in the West, Cuthbert, he thought wonderingly.

And of course in each skull, in each rondure of vacated eye, he saw the boy's face.

The man in black sat on an ancient ironwood log. His boots were powdered white with dust and the uneasy bone-meal of this place. He had put his hood up again, but the gunslinger could see the square shape of his chin clearly, and the shading of his jaw.

The shadowed lips twitched in a smile. "Gather wood, gunslinger. This side of the mountains is gentle, but at this altitude, the cold still may put a knife in one's belly. And this is a place of death, eh?"

"I'll kill you," the gunslinger said.

"No you won't You can't. But you can gather wood to remember your Isaac."

The gunslinger had no understanding of the reference. He went wordlessly and gathered wood like a common cook's boy. The pickings were slim. There was no devil-grass on this side and the ironwood would not burn. It had become stone. He returned finally with a large armload, powdered and dusted with disintegrated bone, as if dipped in flour. The sun had sunk beyond the highest Joshua trees and had taken on a reddish glow and peered at them with baleful indifference through the black, tortured branches.

"Excellent," the man in black said. "How exceptional you are! How methodical! I salute you!" He giggled, and the gunslinger dropped the wood at his feet with a crash that ballooned up bone dust. The man in black did not start or jump; he merely began laying the fire. The gunslinger watched, fascinated, as the idiogram (fresh, this time) took shape. When it was finished, it resembled a small and complex double chimney about two feet high. The man in black lifted his hand skyward, shaking back the voluminous sleeve from a tapered, handsome hand, and brought it down rapidly, index and pinky fingers forked out in the traditional sign of the evil eye. There was a blue flash of flame, and their fire was lighted.

"I have matches," the man in black said jovially, "but I thought you might enjoy the magic. For a pretty, gunslinger. Now cook our dinner."

The folds of his robe shivered, and the plucked and gutted carcass of a plump rabbit fell on the dirt.

The gunslinger spat the rabbit wordlessly and roasted it. A savory smell drifted up as the sun went down.

Purple shadows drifted hungrily over the bowl where the man in black had chosen to finally face him. The gunslinger felt hunger begin to rumble endlessly in his belly as the rabbit browned; but when the meat was cooked and its juices sealed in, he handed the entire skewer wordlessly to the man in black, rummaged in his own nearly flat knapsack, and withdrew the last of his jerky. It was salty, painful to his mouth, and tasted like tears.

"That's a worthless gesture," the man in black said, managing to sound angry and amused at the same time.

"Nevertheless," the gunslinger said. There were tiny sores in his mouth, the result of vitamin deprivation, and the salt taste made him grin bitterly.

"Are you afraid of enchanted meat?"

"Yes."

The man in black slipped his hood back.

The gunslinger looked at him silently. In a way, the face of the man in black was an uneasy disappointment. It was handsome and regular, with none of the marks and twists which indicate a person who has been through awesome times and who has been privy to great and unknown secrets. His hair was black and of a ragged, matted length. His forehead was high, his eyes dark and brilliant. His nose was nondescript. The lips were full and sensual. His complexion was pallid, as was the gunslinger's own.

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He said finally, "I expected an older man.

"Not necessary. I am nearly immortal. I could have taken a face that you more expected, of course, but I elected to show you the one I was - ah - born with. See, gunslinger, the sunset."

The sun had departed already, and the western sky was filled with a sullen furnace light.

"You won't see another sunrise for what may seem a very long time," the man in black said softly.

The gunslinger remembered the pit under the mountains and then looked at the sky, where the constellations sprawled in clockspring profusion.

"It doesn't matter," he said softly, "now."

The man in black shuffled the cards with flying, merging rapidity. The deck was huge, the design

on the backs of the cards convoluted. "These are tarot cards," the man in black was saying, "a mixture of the standard deck and a selection of my own development Watch closely gunslinger."  
"Why?"

"I'm going to tell your future, Roland. Seven cards must be turned, one at a time, and placed in conjunction with the others. I've not done this for over three hundred years. And I suspect I've never read one quite like yours." The mocking note was creeping in again, like a Kuvian night-soldier with a killing knife gripped in one hand. "You are the world's last adventurer. The last crusader. How that must please you, Roland! Yet you have no idea how close you stand to the Tower now, how close in time. Worlds turn about your head."

"Read my fortune then," he said harshly.

The first card was turned.

"The Hanged Man," the man in black said. The darkness had given him back his hood. "Yet here, in conjunction with nothing else, it signifies strength and not death. You, gunslinger, are the Hanged Man, plodding ever onward toward your goal over all the pits of Hades. You have already dropped one co-traveler into the pit, have you not?"

He turned the second card. "The Sailor. Note the clear brow, the hairless cheeks, the wounded eyes. He drowns, gunslinger, and no one throws out the line. The boy Jake."

The gunslinger winced, said nothing.

The third card was turned. A baboon stood grinningly astride a young man's shoulder. The young man's face was turned up, a grimace of stylized dread and horror on his features. Looking more closely, the gunslinger saw the baboon held a whip.

"The Prisoner," the man in black said. The fire cast uneasy, flickering shadows over the face of the ridden man, making it seem to move and writhe in wordless terror. The gunslinger flicked his eyes away.

"A trifle upsetting, isn't he?" The man in black said, and seemed on the verge of sniggering.

He turned the fourth card. A woman with a shawl over her head sat spinning at a wheel. To the gunslinger's dazed eyes, she appeared to be smiling craftily and sobbing at the same time.

"The Lady of Shadows," the man in black remarked. "Does she look two-faced to you, gunslinger? She is. A veritable Janus."

"Why are you showing me these?"

"Don't ask!" The man in black said sharply, yet he smiled. "Don't ask. Merely watch. Consider this only pointless ritual if it eases you and cools you to do so. Like church."

He tittered and turned the fifth card.

A grinning reaper clutched a scythe with bony fingers.

"

"Death," the man in black said simply. "Yet not for you."

The sixth card.

The gunslinger looked at it and felt a strange, crawling anticipation in his guts. The feeling was mixed with horror and joy, and the whole of the emotion was unnamable. It made him feel like throwing up and dancing at the same time.

"The Tower," the man in black said softly.

The gunslinger's card occupied the center of the pattern; each of the following four stood at one corner, like satellites circling a star.

"Where does that one go?" The gunslinger asked.

The man in black placed the Tower over the Hanged Man, covering it completely.

"What does that mean?" The gunslinger asked. The man in black did not answer.

"What does that mean?" He asked raggedly. The man in black did not answer.

"God damn you!" No answer.

"Then what's the seventh card?"

The man in black turned the seventh. A sun rose in a luminously blue sky. Cupids and sprites sported around it

"The seventh is Life," the man in black said softly. "But not for you. "

"Where does it fit the pattern?"

"That is not for you to know," the man in black said. "Or for me to know." He flipped the card carelessly into the dying fire. It charred, curled and flashed to flame. The gunslinger felt his heart quail and turn icy in his chest.

"Sleep now," the man in black said carelessly. "Perchance to dream and that sort of thing."

"I'm going to choke you dead," the gunslinger said. His legs coiled with savage, splendid suddenness, and he flew across the fire at the other. The man in black, smiling, swelled in his vision and then retreated down a long and echoing corridor filled with obsidian pylons. The world

filled with the sound of sardonic laughter, he was falling, dying, sleeping.  
He dreamed.

The universe was void. Nothing moved. Nothing was.

The gunslinger drifted, bemused.

"Let us have light," the voice of the man in black said nonchalantly, and there was light. The gunslinger thought in a detached way that the light was good.

"Now darkness overhead with stars in it. Water down below." It happened. He drifted over endless seas. Above, the stars twinkled endlessly.

"Land," the man in black invited. There was; it heaved itself out of the water in endless, galvanic convulsions. It was red, arid, cracked and glazed with sterility. Volcanoes blurred endless magma like giant pimples on some ugly adolescent's baseball head.

"Okay," the man in black was saying. "That's a start. Let's have some plants. Trees. Grass and fields."

There was. Dinosaurs rambled here and there, growling and woofing and eating each other and getting stuck in bubbling, odiferous tarpits. Huge tropical rain-forests sprawled everywhere. Giant ferns waved at the sky with serrated leaves, beetles with two heads crawled on some of them. All this the gunslinger saw. And yet he felt big.

"Now man," the man in black said softly, but the gunslinger was falling., falling up. The horizon of this vast and fecund earth began to curve. Yes, they had all said it had curved, his teachers, they had claimed it had been proved long before the world had moved on. But this -Further and further. Continents took shape before his amazed eyes, and were obscured with clocksprings of clouds. The world's atmosphere held it in a placental sac. And the sun, rising beyond the earth's shoulder -He cried out and threw an arm before his eyes.

"Let there be light!" The voice that cried was no longer that of the man in black. It was gigantic, echoing. It filled space, and the spaces between spaces.

"Light!"

Falling, falling.

The sun shrank. A red planet crossed with canals whirled past him, two moons circling it furiously. A whirling belt of stones. A gigantic planet that seethed with gasses, too huge to support itself, oblate in consequence. A ringed world that glittered with its engirdlement of icy spicules.

"Light! Let there be -Other worlds, one, two three. Far beyond the last, one lonely ball of ice and rock twirling in dead darkness about a sun that glittered no brighter than a tarnished penny.

Darkness.

"No," the gunslinger said, and his words were flat and echoless in the darkness. It was darker than dark. Beside it the darkest night of a man's soul was noonday. The darkness under the mountains was a mere smudge on the face of Light. "No more, please, no more now. No more -" "LIGHT!"

"No more. No more, please -The stars themselves began to shrink. Whole nebulae drew together and became mindless smudges. The whole universe seemed to be drawing around him.

"Jesus no more no more no more -The voice of the man in black whispered silkily in his

ear: "Then renege. Cast away all thoughts of the Tower. Go your way, gunslinger, and save your soul."

He gathered himself. Shaken and alone, enwrapt in the darkness, terrified of an ultimate meaning rushing at him, he gathered himself and uttered the final, flashing imperative:

"NO! NEVER!"

"THEN LET THERE BE LIGHT!"

And there was light, crashing in on him like a hammer, a great and primordial light. In it, consciousness perished - but before it did, the gunslinger saw something of cosmic importance. He clutched it with agonized effort and sought himself.

He fled the insanity the knowledge implied, and so came back to himself.

It was still night - whether the same or another, he had no way of knowing. He pushed himself up from where

his demon spring at the man in black had carried him and looked at the ironwood where the man in black had been sitting. He was gone.

A great sense of despair flooded him - God, all that to do over again - and then the man in black said from behind him: "Over here, gunslinger. I don't like you so close. You talk in your sleep."

He tittered.

The gunslinger got groggily to his knees and turned around. The fire had burned down to red embers and gray ashes, leaving the familiar decayed pattern of exhausted fuel. The man in black was seated next to it, smacking his lips over the greasy remains of the rabbit.

"You did fairly well," the man in black said. "I never could have sent that vision to Marten. He would have come back drooling."

"What was it?" The gunslinger asked. His words were blurred and shaky. He felt that if he tried to rise, his legs would buckle.

"The universe," the man in black said carelessly. He burped and threw the bones into the fire where they glistened with unhealthy whiteness. The wind above the cup of the Golgotha whistled with keen unhappiness.

"Universe," the gunslinger said blankly.

"You want the Tower," the man in black said. It seemed to be a question.

"Yes."

"But you shan't have it," the man in black said, and smiled with bright cruelty. "I have an idea of how close to the edge that last pushed you. The Tower will kill you half a world away."

"You know nothing of me," the gunslinger said quietly, and the smile faded from the other's lips.

"I made your father and I broke him," the man in black said grimly. "I came to your mother through Marten and took her. It was written, and it was. I am the furthest minion of the Dark Tower. Earth has been given into my hand."

"What did I see?" The gunslinger asked. "At the end? What was it?"

"What did it seem to be?"

The gunslinger was silent, thoughtful. He felt for his tobacco, but there was none. The man in black did not offer to refill his poke by either black magic or white.

"There was light," the gunslinger said finally. "Great white light. And then — " He broke off and stared at the man in black. He was leaning forward, and an alien emotion was stamped on his face, writ too large for lies or denial. Wonder.

"You don't know," he said, and began to smile. "O great sorcerer who brings the dead to life. You don't know."

"I know," the man in black said. "But I don't know... what."

"White light," the gunslinger repeated. "And then — a blade of grass. One single blade of grass that filled every.' thing. And I was tiny. Infinitesimal."

"Grass." The man in black closed his eyes. His face looked drawn and haggard. "A blade of grass. Are you sure?"

"Yes." The gunslinger frowned. "But it was purple."

And so the man in black began to speak.

The universe (he said) offers a paradox too great for the finite mind to grasp. As the living brain cannot conceive of a nonliving brain — although it may think it can — the finite mind cannot grasp the infinite.

The prosaic fact of the universe's existence single-handedly defeats the pragmatist and the cynic. There was a time, yet a hundred generations before the world moved on, when mankind had achieved enough technical and scientific prowess to chip a few splinters from the great stone pillar of reality. Even then, the false light of science (knowledge, if you like) shone in only a few developed countries. Yet, despite a tremendous increase in available facts, there were remarkably few insights. Gunslinger, our fathers conquered the-disease-which-rots, which we call cancer, almost conquered aging, went to the moon — ("I don't believe that," the gunslinger said flatly, to

which the man in black merely smiled and answered, "You needn't.")

— and made or discovered a hundred other marvelous baubles. But this wealth of information produced little or no insight. There were no great odes written to the wonders of artificial insemination — ("What?" "Having babies from frozen mansperm. "

"Bullshit." "As you wish..., although not even the ancients could produce children from that material.")

— or to the car-which-moves. Few if any seemed to have grasped the Principle of Reality; new knowledge leads always to yet more awesome mysteries. Greater physiological knowledge of the brain makes the existence of the soul less possible yet more probable by the nature of the search. Do you see? Of course you don't. You are surrounded by your own romantic aura, you lie cheek and jowl daily with the arcane. Yet now you approach the limits —not of belief, but of comprehension. You face reverse entropy of the soul.

But to the more prosaic:



The greatest mystery the universe offers is not life but Size. Size encompasses life, and the Tower encompasses Size. The child, who is most at home with wonder, says: Daddy, what is above the sky? And the father says: The darkness of space. The child: What is beyond space? The father: The galaxy. The child: Beyond the galaxy? The father: Another galaxy. The child: Beyond the other galaxies? The father: No one knows. You see? Size defeats us. For the fish, the lake in which he lives is the universe. What does the fish think when he is jerked up by the mouth through the silver limits of existence and into a new universe where the air drowns him and the light is blue madness? Where hugh bipeds with no gills stuff it into a suffocating box and cover it with wet weeds to die?

Or one might take the point of a pencil and magnify it. One reaches the point where a stunning realization strikes home: The pencil point is not solid; it is composed of atoms which whirl and revolve like a trillion demon planets. What seems solid to us is actually only a loose net held together by gravitation. Shrunk to the correct size, the distances between these atoms might become leagues, gulfs, aeons. The atoms themselves are composed of nuclei and revolving protons and electrons. One may step down further to subatomic particles. And then to what? Tachyons? Nothing? Of course not. Everything in the universe denies nothing; to suggest conclusions to things is one impossibility.

If you fell outward to the limit of the universe, would you find a board fence and signs reading DEAD END? No. You might find something hard and rounded, as the chick must see the egg from the inside. And if you should peck through that shell, what great and torrential light might shine through your hole at the end of space? Might you look through and discover our entire universe is but part of one atom on a blade of grass? Might you be forced to think that by burning a twig you incinerate an eternity of eternities? That existence rises not to one infinite but to an infinity of them?

Perhaps you saw what place our universe plays in the scheme of things – as an atom in a blade of grass. Could it be that everything we can perceive, from the infinitesimal virus to the distant Horsehead Nebula, is contained in one blade of grass. . . a blade that may have existed for only a day or two in an alien time-flow? What if that blade should be cut off by a scythe? When it began to die, would the rot seep into our own universe and our own lives, turning everything yellow and brown and desicated? Perhaps it's already begun to happen. We say the world has moved on; maybe we really mean that it has begun to dry up.

Think how small such a concept of things makes us, gunslinger! If a God watches over it all, does He actually mete out justice for a race of gnats among an infinitude of races of gnats? Does his eye see the sparrow fall when the sparrow is less than a speck of hydrogen floating disconnected in the depth of space? And if He does see... what must the nature of such a God be? Where does He live? How is it possible to live beyond infinity?

Imagine the sand of the Mohaine Desert, which you crossed to find me, and imagine a trillion universes – not worlds but universes – encapsulated in each grain of that desert; and within each universe an infinity of others. We tower over these universes from our pitiful grass vantage point; with one swing of your boot you may knock a billion billion worlds flying off into darkness, in a chain never to be completed.

Size, gunslinger... Size....

Yet suppose further. Suppose that all worlds, all universes, met in a single nexus, a single pylon, a Tower. A stairway, perhaps, to the Godhead itself. Would you dare, gunslinger? Could it be that somewhere above all of endless reality, there exists a Room...?

You dare not.

You dare not.

"Someone has dared," the gunslinger said.

"Who would that be?"

"God," the gunslinger said softly. His eyes gleamed. "God has dared. . . or is the room empty, seer?"

"I don't know." Fear passed over the man in black's bland face, as soft and dark as a buzzard's wing. "And, furthermore, I don't ask. It might be unwise."

"Afraid of being struck dead?" The gunslinger asked sardonically.

"Perhaps afraid of an accounting," the man in black replied, and there was silence for a while. The night was very long. The Milky Way sprawled above them in great splendor, yet terrifying in its emptiness. The gunslinger wondered what he would feel if that inky sky should split open and let in a torrent of light.

"The fire," he said. "I'm cold."

The gunslinger drowsed and awoke to see the man in black regarding him avidly, unhealthily.

"What are you staring at?"

"You, of course. "

"Well, don't" He poked up the fire, ruining the precision of the idiogram. "I don't like it." He looked to the east to see if there was the beginning of light, but this night went on and on.

"You seek the light so soon?"

"I was made for light"

"Ah, so you were! And so impolite of me to forget the fact! Yet we have much to discuss yet, you and I. For so has it been told to me by my master."

"Who?"

The man in black smiled. "Shall we tell the truth then, you and I? No more lies? No more glammer?"

"Glammer? What does that mean?"

But the man in black persisted: "Shall there be truth between us, as two men? Not as friends, but as enemies and equals? There is an offer you will get rarely, Roland. Only enemies speak the truth. Friends and lovers lie endlessly, caught in the web of duty."

"Then we'll speak the truth." He had never spoken

less on this night "Start by telling me what glammer is."

"Glammer is enchantment, gunslinger. My master's enchantment has prolonged this night and will prolong it still.., until our business is done. "

"How long will that be?"

"Long. T can tell you no better. I do not know myself." The man in black stood over the fire, and the glowing embers made patterns on his face. "Ask. I will tell you what I know. You have caught me. It is fair; I did not think you would. Yet your quest has only begun. Ask. It will lead us to business soon enough."

"Who is your master?"

"I have never seen him, but you must. In order to reach the Tower you must reach this one first, the Ageless Stranger. " The man in black smiled spitelessly. "You must slay him, gunslinger. Yet I think it is not what you wished to ask."

"If you've never seen him, how do you know him?"

"He came to me once in a dream. As a stripling he came to me, when I lived in a far land. A thousand years ago, or five or ten. He came to me in days before the old ones had yet to cross the sea. In a land called England. A sheaf of centuries ago he imbued me with my duty, although there were errands in between my youth and my apotheosis. You are that, gunslinger." He tittered. "You see, someone has taken you seriously."

"This Stranger has no name?"

"O, he is named."

"And what is his name?"

"Maerlyn," the man in black said softly, and somewhere in the easterly darkness where the mountains lay a rockslide punctuated his words and a puma screamed like a woman. The gunslinger shivered and the man in black flinched. "Yet I do not think that is what you wished to ask, either. It is not your nature to think so far ahead."

The gunslinger knew the question; it had gnawed him all this night, and he thought, for years before. It trembled on his lips but he didn't ask it... not yet.

"This Stranger, this Maerlyn, is a minion of the Tower? Like yourself?"

"Much greater than I. It has been given to him to live backward in time. He darkies. He tincts. He is in all times. Yet there is one greater than he."

"Who?"

"The Beast," the man in black whispered fearfully. "The keeper of the Tower. The originator of all glammer.

"What is it? What does this Beast - "

"Ask me no more!" The man in black cried. His voice aspired to sternness and crumbled into beseechment. "I know not! I do not wish to know. To speak of the Beast is to speak of the ruination of one's own soul. Before It, Maerlyn is as Jam to him."

"And beyond the Beast is the Tower and whatever the Tower contains?"

"Yes," whispered the man in black. "But none of these things are what you wish to ask."

True.

"All right," the gunslinger said, and then asked the world's oldest question. "Do I know you? Have I seen you somewhere before?"

"Yes."

"Where?" The gunslinger leaned forward urgently. This was a question of his destiny. The man in black clapped his hands to his mouth and giggled through them like a small child. "I think you know. "

"Where!" He was on his feet; his hands had dropped to the worn butts of his guns.

"Not with those, gunslinger. Those do not open doors; those only close them forever. "

"Where?" The gunslinger reiterated.

"Must I give him a hint?" The man in black asked the darkness. "I believe I must "He looked at the gunslinger with eyes that burned. "There was a man who gave you advice," he said. "Your teacher - "

"Yes, Cort," the gunslinger interrupted impatiently.

"The advice was to wait. It was bad advice. For even then Marten's plans against your father had proceeded. And when your father returned - "

"He was killed," the gunslinger said emptily.

"And when you turned and looked, Marten was gone

... gone west Yet there was a man in Marten's entourage, a man who affected the dress of a monk and the shaven head of a penitent - "

"Walter," the gunslinger whispered. "You. .. you're not Marten at all. You're Walter!"

The man in black tittered. "At your service. "

"I ought to kill you now."

"That would hardly be fair. After all, it was I who delivered Marten into your hands three years later, when - "

"Then you've controlled me."

"In some ways, yes. But no more, gunslinger. Now comes the time of sharing. Then, in the morning, I will cast the runes. Dreams will come to you. And then your real quest must begin."

"Walter," the gunslinger repeated, stunned.

"Sit," the man in black invited. "I tell you my story. Yours, I think, will be much longer. "

"I don't talk of myself," the gunslinger muttered.

"Yet tonight you must So that we may understand."

"Understand what? My purpose? You know that To find the Tower is my purpose. I'm sworn."

"Not your purpose, gunslinger. Your mind. Your slow, plodding, tenacious mind. There has never been one quite like it, in all the history of the world. Perhaps in the history of creation.

"This is the time of speaking. This is the time of histories.

"Then speak."

The man in black shook the voluminous arm of his robe. A foil-wrapped package fell out and caught the dying embers in many reflective folds.

"Tobacco, gunslinger. Would you smoke?"

He had been able to resist the rabbit, but he could not resist this. He opened the foil with eager fingers. There was fine crumbled tobacco inside, and green leaves to wrap it in, amazingly moist. He had not seen such tobacco for ten years.

He rolled two cigarettes and bit the ends of each to release flavor. He offered one to the man in black, who took it. Each of them took a burning twig from the fire.

The gunslinger lit his cigarette and drew the aromatic smoke deep into his lungs, closing his eyes to concentrate the senses. He blew out with long, slow satisfaction.

"Is it good?" the man in black enquired.

"Yes. Very good."

"Enjoy it. It may be the last smoke for you in a very long time."

The gunslinger took this impassively.

"Very well," the man in black said. "To begin then:

"You must understand that the Tower has always been, and there have always been boys who know of it and lust for it, more than power or riches or women.. "

There was talk then, a night's worth of talk and God alone knew how much more, but the Gunslinger remembered little of it later. . . and to his oddly practical mind, little of it seemed to matter. The man in black told him that he must go to the sea, which lay no more than twenty easy miles to the west, and there he would be invested with the power of drawing.

"But that's not exactly right, either," the man in black said, pitching his cigarette into the remains of the campfire. "No one wants to invest you with a power of any kind, gunslinger; it is simply in you, and I am compelled to tell you, partly because of the sacrifice of the boy, and partly because it is the law; the natural law of things. Water must run downhill, and you must be told. You will draw three, I understand... but I don't really care, and I don't really want to

know."

"The three," the gunslinger murmured, thinking of the Oracle.

"And then the fun begins. But, by then, I'll be long gone. Good-bye, gunslinger. My part is done now. The chain is still in your hands. Beware it doesn't wrap itself around your neck."

Compelled by something outside him, Roland said, "You have one more thing to say, don't you?"

"Yes," the man in black said, and he smiled at the gunslinger with his depthless eyes and stretched one of his hands out toward him. "Let there be light."

And there was light.

Roland awoke by the ruins of the campfire to find himself ten years older. His black hair had thinned at the temples and gone the gray of cobwebs at the end of autumn. The lines in his face were deeper, his skin rougher.

The remains of the wood he had carried had turned to ironwood, and the man in black was a laughing skeleton in a rotting black robe, more bones in this place of bones, one more skull in Golgotha.

The gunslinger stood up and looked around. He looked at the light and saw that the light was good.

With a sudden quick gesture he reached toward the remains of his companion of the night before., a night that had somehow lasted ten years. He broke off Walter's jawbone and jammed it carelessly into the left hip pocket of his jeans - a fitting enough replacement for the one lost under the mountains.

The Tower. Somewhere ahead, it waited for him - the nexus of Time, the nexus of Size.

He began west again, his back set against the sunrise, heading toward the ocean, realizing that a great passage of his life had come and gone. "I loved you, Jake," he said aloud.

The stiffness wore out of his body and he began to walk more rapidly. By that evening he had come to the end of the land. He sat on a beach which stretched left and right forever, deserted. The waves beat endlessly against the shore, pounding and pounding. The setting sun painted the water in a wide strip of fool's gold.

There the gunslinger sat, his face turned up into the fading light. He dreamed his dreams and watched as the stars came out; his purpose did not flag, nor did his heart falter; his hair, finer now and gray, blew around his head, and the sandalwood-inlaid guns of his father lay smooth and deadly against his hips, and he was lonely but did not find loneliness in any way a bad or ignoble thing. The dark came down on the world and the world moved on. The gunslinger waited for the time of the drawing and dreamed his long dreams of the Dark Tower, to which he would some day come at dusk and approach, winding his horn, to do some unimaginable final battle.

#### AFTERWORD

The foregoing tale, which is almost (but not quite!) complete in itself, is the first stanza in a much longer work called The Dark Tower. Some of the work beyond this segment has been completed, but there is much more to be done

- my brief synopsis of the action to follow suggests a length approaching 3000 pages, perhaps more. That probably sounds as if my plans for the story have passed beyond mere ambition and into the land of lunacy... but ask your favorite English teacher sometime to tell you about the plans Chaucer had for The Canterbury Tales - now Chaucer might have been crazy.

At the speed which the work entire has progressed so far, I would have to live approximately 300 years to complete the tale of the Tower; this segment, "The Gunslinger and the Dark Tower," was written over a period of twelve years. It is by far the longest I've taken with any work... and it might be more honest to put it another way: it is the longest that any of my unfinished works has remained alive and viable in my own mind, and if a book is not alive in the writer's mind, it is as dead as year-old horse shit even if words continue to march across the page.

The Dark Tower began, I think, because I inherited a ream of paper in the spring semester of my senior year in college. It wasn't a ream of your ordinary garden-variety bond paper, not even a ream of those colorful "second sheets" that many struggling writers use because those reams of colored sheets (often with large chunks of undissolved wood floating in them) are three or four dollars cheaper.

The ream of paper I inherited was bright green, nearly as thick as cardboard, and of an extremely eccentric size- about seven inches wide by about ten inches long, as I recall. I was working at the University of Maine library at the time, and several reams of this stuff, in various hues, turned up one day, totally unexplained and unaccounted for. My wife-to-be, the then Tabitha Spruce, took one of these reams of paper (robin's egg blue) home with her; the fellow she was then going with took home another (Roadrunner yellow). I got the green stuff.

As it happened, all three of us turned out to be real writers—a coincidence almost too large to be termed mere coincidence in a society where literally tens of thousands (maybe hundreds of thousands) of college students aspire to the writer's trade and where bare hundreds actually break through. I've gone on to publish half a dozen novels or so, my wife has published one (Small World) and is hard at work on an even better one, and the fellow she was going with back then, David Lyons, has developed into a fine poet and the founder of Lynx Press in Massachusetts. Maybe it was the paper, folks. Maybe it was magic paper. You know, like in a Stephen King novel. Anyway, all of you out there reading this may not understand how fraught with possibility those five hundred sheets of blank paper seemed to be, although I'd guess there are plenty of you who are nodding in perfect understanding right now. Publishing writers can, of course, have all the blank paper they want; it is their stock-in-trade. It's even tax deductible. They can have so much, in fact, that all of those blank sheets can actually begin to cast a malign spell —better writers than I have talked about the mute challenge of all that white space, and God knows some of them have been intimidated into silence by it. The other side of the coin, particularly to a young writer, is almost unholy exhilaration all that blank paper can bring on; you feel like an alcoholic contemplating a fifth of whiskey with the seal unbroken.

I was at that time living in a scuzzy riverside cabin not far from the University, and I was living all by myself —the first third of the foregoing tale was written in a ghastly, unbroken silence which I now, with a houseful of rioting children, two secretaries, and a housekeeper who always thinks I look ill, find hard to remember. The three roommates with whom I had begun the year had all flunked out By March, when the ice went out of the river, I felt like the last of Agatha Christie's ten little Indians.

Those two factors, the challenge of that blank green paper, and the utter silence (except for the trickle of the melting snow as it ran downhill and into the Stillwater), were more responsible than anything else for the opening lay of *The Dark Tower*. There was a third factor, but without the first two, I don't believe the story ever would have been written.

That third element was a poem I'd been assigned two years earlier, in a sophomore course covering the earlier romantic poets (and what better time to study romantic poetry than in one's sophomore year?). Most of the other poems had fallen out of my consciousness in the period between, but that one, gorgeous and rich and inexplicable, remained.., and it remains still. That poem was "Childe Roland," by Robert Browning.

I had played with the idea of trying a long romantic novel embodying the feel, if not the exact sense, of the Browning poem. Play was as far as things had gone because I had too many other things to write — poems of my own, short stories, newspaper columns, God knows what.

But during that spring semester, a sort of hush fell over my previously busy creative life— not a writer's block, but a sense that it was time to stop goofing around with a pick and shovel and get behind the controls of one big great God a' mighty steam shovel, a sense that it was time to try and dig something big out of the sand, even if the effort turned out to be an abysmal failure. And so, one night in March of 1970, I found myself sitting at my old office-model Underwood with the chipped 'm' and the flying capital 'O' and writing the words that begin this story: The man in black/led across the desert and the gun-slinger followed.

In the years since I typed that sentence, with Johnny Winter on the stereo not quite masking the sound of melting snow running downhill outside, I have started to go gray, I have begotten children, I have buried my mother, I have gone on drugs and gone off them, and I've learned a few things about myself — some of them rueful, some of them unpleasant, most of them just plain funny. As the gunslinger himself would probably point out, the world has moved on.

But I've never completely left the gunslinger's world in all that time. The thick green paper got lost somewhere along the way, but I still have the original forty or so pages of typescript, comprising the sections titled "The Gunslinger" and "The Way Station." It was replaced by a more legitimate-looking paper, but I remember those funny green sheets with more affection than I could ever convey in words. I came back to the gunslinger's world when Salem's Lot was going badly ("The Oracle and the Mountains") and wrote of the boy Jake's sad ending not long after I had seen another boy, Danny Torrance, escape another bad place in *The Shining* In fact, the only time when my thoughts did not turn at least occasionally to the gunslinger's dry and yet somehow gorgeous world (at least it has always seemed gorgeous to me) was when I was inhabiting another that seemed every bit as real — the post-apocalypse world of *The Stand*. The final segment presented here, "The Gunslinger and the Man in Black," was written less than eighteen months ago, in western Maine.

I believe that I probably owe readers who have come this far with me some sort of synopsis ("the argument," those great old romantic poets would have called it) of what is to come, since I'll

almost surely die before completing the entire novel... or epic... or whatever you'd call it. The sad fact is that I can't really do that. People who know me understand that I am not an intellectual ball of fire, and people who have read my work with some critical approval (there are a few; I bribe them) would probably agree that the best of my stuff has come more from the heart than from the head... or from the gut, which is the place from which the strongest emotional writing originates.

All of which is just a way of saying that I'm never completely sure where I'm going, and in this story that is even more true than usual. I know from Roland's vision near the end that his world is indeed moving on because Roland's universe exists within a single molecule of a weed dying in some cosmic vacant lot (I think I probably got this idea from Clifford D. Simak's Ring Around the Sun; please don't sue me, Cliff!), and I know that the drawing involves calling three people from our own world (as Jake himself was called by the man in black) who will join Roland in his quest for the Dark Tower— I know that because segments of the second cycle of stories (called "The Drawing of the Three") have already been written.

But what of the gunslinger's murky past? God, I know so little. The revolution that topples the gunslinger's "world of light"? I don't know. Roland's final confrontation with Marten, who seduces his mother and kills his father? Don't know. The deaths of Roland's compatriots, Cuthbert and Jamie, or his adventures during the years between his coming of age and his first appearance to us in the desert?

I don't know that, either. And there's this girl, Susan. Who is she? Don't know.

Except somewhere inside, I do. Somewhere inside I know all of those things, and there is no need of an argument, or a synopsis, or an outline (outlines are the last resource of bad fiction writers who wish to God they were writing masters' theses). When it's time, those things— and their relevance to the gunslinger's quest—will roll out as naturally as tears or laughter. And if they never get around to rolling out, well, as Confucius once said, five hundred million Red Chinese don't give a shit.

I do know this: at some point, at some magic time, there will be a purple evening (an evening made for romance!) when Roland will come to his dark tower, and approach it, winding his horn... and if I should ever get there, you'll be the first to know.

Stephen King  
Bangor, Maine

# THE DARK TOWER II

## THE DRAWING OF THE THREE

Stephen King

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To Don Grant, who's taken a chance on these novels, one by one.

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## ARGUMENT

The Drawing of the Three is the second volume of a long tale called The Dark Tower, a tale inspired by and to some degree dependent upon Robert Browning's narrative poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (which in its turn owes a debt to King Lear).

The first volume, The Gunslinger, tells how Roland, the last gunslinger of a world which has "moved on," finally catches up with the man in black ... a sorcerer he has chased for a very long time—just how long we do not yet know. The man in black turns out to be a fellow named Walter, who falsely claimed the friendship of Roland's father in those days before the world moved on.

Roland's goal is not this half-human creature but the Dark Tower; the man in black—and, more specifically, what the man in black knows—is his first step on his road to that mysterious place.

Who, exactly, is Roland? What was his world like before it "moved on?" What is the Tower, and why does he pursue it? We have only fragmentary answers. Roland is a gunslinger, a kind of knight, one of those charged with holding a world Roland remembers as being "filled with love and light" as it is; to keep it from moving on.

We know that Roland was forced to an early trial of manhood after discovering that his mother had become the mistress of Marten, a much greater sorcerer than Walter (who, unknown to Roland's father, is Marten's ally); we know Marten has planned Roland's discovery, expecting Roland to fail and to be "sent West"; we know that Roland triumphs in his test.

What else do we know? That the gunslinger's world is not completely unlike our own. Artifacts such as gasoline pumps and certain songs ("Hey Jude," for instance, or the bit of doggerel that begins "Beans, beans, the musical fruit . . .") have survived; so have customs and rituals oddly like those from our own romanticized view of the American west.

And there is an umbilicus which somehow connects our world to the world of the gunslinger. At a way-station on a long-deserted coach-road in a great and sterile desert, Roland meets a boy named Jake who died in our world. A boy who was, in fact, pushed from a street-corner by the ubiquitous (and iniquitous) man in black. The last thing Jake, who was on his way to school with his book-bag in one hand and his • lunch-box in the other, remembers of his world—our world— I is being crushed beneath the wheels of a Cadillac . . . and dying.

Before reaching the man in black, Jake dies again. . . this time because the gunslinger, faced with the second-most agon-izing choice of his life, elects to sacrifice this symbolic son. Given a choice between the Tower and child, possibly between damnation and salvation, Roland chooses the Tower.

"Go, then," Jake tells him before plunging into the abyss. "There are other worlds than these."

The final confrontation between Roland and Walter occurs in a dusty golgotha of decaying bones. The dark man tells Roland's future with a deck of Tarot cards. These cards, showing a man called The Prisoner, a woman called The Lady of Shadows, and a darker shape that is simply Death ("but not for you, gunslinger,"

the man in black tells him), are prophecies which become the subject of this volume. . . and Roland's second step on the long and difficult path to the Dark Tower.

The Gunslinger end?, with Roland sitting upon the beach of the Western Sea, watching the sunset. The man in black is dead, the gunslinger's own future course unclear; The Drawing of the Three begins on that same beach, less than seven hours later.

## -PROLOGUE: THE SAILOR

### PROLOGUE

The gunslinger came awake from a confused dream which seemed to consist of a single image: that of the Sailor in the Tarot deck from which the man in black had dealt (or purported to deal) the gunslinger's own moaning future.

He drowns, gunslinger, the man in black was saying, and no one throws out the line. The boy Jake.

But this was no nightmare. It was a good dream. It was good because he was the one drowning, and that meant he was not Roland at all but Jake, and he found this a relief because it would be far better to drown as Jake than to live as himself, a man who had, for a cold dream, betrayed a child who had trusted him. Good, all right, I'll drown, he thought, listening to the roar of the sea. Let me drown. But this was not the sound of the open deeps; it was the grating sound of water with a throatful of stones. Was he the Sailor? If so, why was land so close? And, in fact, was he not on the land? It felt as if—

Freezing cold water doused his boots and ran up his legs to his crotch. His eyes flew open then, and what snapped him out of the dream wasn't his freezing balls, which had suddenly shrunk to what felt like the size of walnuts, nor even the horror to his right, but the thought of his guns. . . his guns, and even more important, his shells. Wet guns could be quickly disassembled, wiped dry, oiled, wiped dry again, oiled again, and re-assembled; wet shells, like wet matches, might or might not ever be usable again.

The horror was a crawling thing which must have been cast up by a previous wave. It dragged a wet, gleaming body laboriously along the sand. It was about four feet long and about four yards to the right. It regarded Roland with bleak eyes on stalks. Its long serrated beak dropped open and it began to make a noise that was weirdly like human speech: plaintive, even desperate questions in an alien tongue. "Did-a-chick? Dum-a-chum? Dad-a-cham? Ded-a-check?"

The gunslinger had seen lobsters. This wasn't one, although lobsters were the only things he had ever seen which this creature even vaguely resembled. It didn't seem afraid of him at all. The gunslinger didn't know if it was dangerous or not. He didn't care about his own mental confusion—his temporary inability to remember where he was or how he had gotten there, if he had actually caught the

man in black or if all that had only been a dream. He only knew he had to get away from the water before it could drown his shells.

He heard the grinding, swelling roar of water and looked from the creature (it had stopped and was holding up the claws with which it had been pulling itself along, looking absurdly like a boxer assuming his opening stance, which, Cort had taught them, was called The Honor Stance) to the incoming breaker with its curdle of foam.

It hears the wave, the gunslinger thought. Whatever it is, it's got ears. He tried to get up, but his legs, too numb to feel, buckled under him.

I'm still dreaming, he thought, but even in his current confused state this was a belief much too tempting to really be believed. He tried to get up again, almost made it, then fell back. The wave was breaking. There was no time again. He had to settle for moving in much the same way the creature on his right seemed to move: he dug in with both hands and dragged his butt up the stony shingle, away from the wave.

He didn't progress enough to avoid the wave entirely, but he got far enough for his purposes. The wave buried nothing but his boots. It reached almost to his knees and then retreated. Perhaps the first one didn't go as far as I thought.

Perhaps—

There was a half-moon in the sky. A caul of mist covered it, but it shed enough light for him to see that the holsters were too dark. The guns, at least, had suffered a wetting. It was impossible to tell how bad it had been, or if either the shells currently in the cylinders or those in the crossed gunbelts had also been wetted. Before checking, he had to get away from the water. Had to—"Dod-a-chock?" This was much closer. In his worry over the water he had forgotten the creature the water had cast up. He looked around and saw it was now only four feet away. Its claws were buried in the stone- and shell-littered sand of the shingle, pulling its body along. It lifted its meaty, serrated body, making it momentarily resemble a scorpion, but Roland could see no stinger at the end of its body.

Another grinding roar, this one much louder. The creature immediately stopped and raised its claws into its own peculiar version of the Honor Stance again.

This wave was bigger. Roland began to drag himself up the slope of the strand again, and when he put out his hands, the clawed creature moved with a speed of which its previous movements had not even hinted.

The gunslinger felt a bright flare of pain in his right hand, but there was no time to think about that now. He pushed with the heels of his soggy boots, clawed with his hands, and managed to get away from the wave.

"Did-a-chick?" the monstrosity enquired in its plaintive Won't you help me? Can't you see I am desperate? voice, and Roland saw the stumps of the first and second fingers of his right hand disappearing into the creature's jagged beak. It lunged again and Roland lifted his dripping right hand just in time to save his remaining two fingers.

"Dum-a-chum? Dad-a-cham?"

The gunslinger staggered to his feet. The thing tore open his dripping jeans, tore through a boot whose old leather was soft but as tough as iron, and took a chunk of meat from Roland's lower calf.

He drew with his right hand, and realized two of the fingers needed to perform this ancient killing operation were gone only when the revolver thumped to the sand.

The monstrosity snapped at it greedily.

"No, bastard!" Roland snarled, and kicked it. It was like kicking a block of rock. . . one that bit. It tore away the end of Roland's right boot, tore away most of his great toe, tore the boot itself from his foot.

The gunslinger bent, picked up his revolver, dropped it, cursed, and finally managed. What had once been a thing so easy it didn't even bear thinking about had suddenly become a trick akin to juggling.

The creature was crouched on the gunslinger's boot, tear-ing at it as it asked its garbled questions. A wave rolled toward the beach, the foam which curdled its top looking pallid and dead in the netted light of the half-moon. The lobstrosity stopped working on the boot and raised its claws in that boxer's pose.

Roland drew with his left hand and pulled the trigger three times. Click, click, click.

Now he knew about the shells in the chambers, at least.

He bolstered the left gun. To holster the right he had to turn its barrel downward with his left hand and then let it drop into its place. Blood slimed the worn ironwood handgrips; blood spotted the holster and the old jeans to which the holster was thong-tied. It poured from the stumps where his fingers used to be.

His mangled right foot was still too numb to hurt, but his right hand was a bellowing fire. The ghosts of talented and long-trained fingers which were already decomposing in the digestive juices of that thing's guts screamed that they were still there, that they were burning.

I see serious problems ahead, the gunslinger thought remotely.

The wave retreated. The monstrosity lowered its claws, tore a fresh hole in the gunslinger's boot, and then decided the wearer had been a good deal more tasty than this bit of skin it had somehow sloughed off.

"Dud-a-chum?" it asked, and scurried toward him with ghastly speed. The gunslinger retreated on legs he could barely feel, realizing that the creature must have some intelli-gence; it had approached him cautiously, perhaps from a long way down the strand, not sure what he was or of what he might be capable. If the dousing wave hadn't wakened him, the thing would have torn off his face while he was still deep in his dream. Now it had decided he was not only tasty but vulnera-ble; easy prey.

It was almost upon him, a thing four feet long and a foot high, a creature which might weigh as much as seventy pounds and which was as single-mindedly carnivorous as David, the hawk he had had as a boy—but without David's dim vestige of loyalty.

The gunslinger's left bootheel struck a rock jutting from the sand and he tottered on the edge of falling.

"Dod-a-chock?" the thing asked, solicitously it seemed, and peered at the gunslinger from its stalky, waving eyes as its claws reached . . . and then a wave came, and the claws went up again in the Honor Stance. Yet now they wavered the slightest bit, and the gunslinger realized that it responded to the sound of the wave, and now the sound was—for it, at least—fading a bit.

He stepped backward over the rock, then bent down as the wave broke upon the shingle with its grinding roar. His head was inches from the insectile face of the creature. One of its claws might easily have slashed the eyes from his face, but its trembling claws, so like clenched fists, remained raised to either side

of its parrotlike beak.

The gunslinger reached for the stone over which he had nearly fallen. It was large, half-buried in the sand, and his mutilated right hand howled as bits of dirt and sharp edges of pebble ground into the open bleeding flesh, but he yanked the rock free and raised it, his lips pulled away from his teeth.

"Dad-a—" the monstrosity began, its claws lowering and opening as the wave broke and its sound receded, and the gunslinger swept the rock down upon it with all his strength.

There was a crunching noise as the creature's segmented back broke. It lashed wildly beneath the rock, its rear half lifting and thudding, lifting and thudding. Its interrogatives became buzzing exclamations of pain. Its claws opened and shut upon nothing. Its maw of a beak gnashed up clots of sand and pebbles.

And yet, as another wave broke, it tried to raise its claws again, and when it did the gunslinger stepped on its head with his remaining boot. There was a sound like many small dry twigs being broken. Thick fluid burst from beneath the heel of Roland's boot, splashing in two directions. It looked black.

The thing arched and wriggled in a frenzy. The gunslinger planted his boot harder.

A wave came.

The monstrosity's claws rose an inch . . . two inches . . . trembled and then fell, twitching open and shut.

The gunslinger removed his boot. The thing's serrated beak, which had separated two fingers and one toe from his living body, slowly opened and closed. One antenna lay broken on the sand. The other trembled meaninglessly.

The gunslinger stamped down again. And again.

He kicked the rock aside with a grunt of effort and marched along the right side of the monstrosity's body, stamp-ing methodically with his left boot, smashing its shell, squeez-ing its pale guts out onto dark gray sand. It was dead, but he meant to have his way with it all the same; he had never, in all his long strange time, been so fundamentally hurt, and it had all been so unexpected. He kept on until he saw the tip of one of his own fingers in the dead thing's sour mash, saw the white dust beneath the nail from the golgotha where he and the man in black had held their long palaver, and then he looked aside and vomited.

The gunslinger walked back toward the water like a drunken man, holding his wounded hand against his shirt, looking back from time to time to make sure the thing wasn't still alive, like some tenacious wasp you swat again and again and still twitches, stunned but not dead; to make sure it wasn't following, asking its alien questions in its deadly despairing voice.

Halfway down the shingle he stood swaying, looking at the place where he had been, remembering. He had fallen asleep, apparently, just below the high tide line. He grabbed his purse and his torn boot.

In the moon's glabrous light he saw other creatures of the same type, and in the caesura between one wave and the next, heard their questioning voices.

The gunslinger retreated a step at a time, retreated until he reached the grassy edge of the shingle. There he sat down, and did all he knew to do: he sprinkled the stumps of fingers and toe with the last of his tobacco to stop the bleeding, sprinkled it thick in spite of the new stinging (his missing great toe had joined the chorus), and then he only sat, sweating in the chill, wondering about

infection, wondering how he would make his way in this world with two fingers on his right hand gone (when it came to the guns both hands had been equal, but in all other things his right had ruled), wondering if the thing had some poison in its bite which might already be working its way into him, wondering if morning would ever come.

## THE DOOR

1

Three. This is the number of your fate.

Three?

Yes, three is mystic. Three stands at the heart of the mantra.

Which three?

The first is dark-haired. He stands on the brink of robbery and murder. A demon has infested him. The name of the demon is HEROIN.

Which demon is that? I know it not, even from nursery stories.

He tried to speak but his voice was gone, the voice of the oracle, Star-Slut, Whore of the Winds, both were gone; he saw a card fluttering down from nowhere to now here, turning and turning in the lazy dark. On it a baboon grinned from over the shoulder of a young man with dark hair; its disturbingly human fingers were buried so deeply in the young man's neck that their tips had disappeared in flesh. Looking more closely, the gunslinger saw the baboon held a whip in one of those clutching, strangling hands. The face of the ridden man seemed to writhe in wordless terror.

The Prisoner, the man in black (who had once been a man the gunslinger trusted, a man named Walter) whispered chummily. A trifle upsetting, isn't he? A trifle upsetting ... a trifle upsetting ... a trifle—

2

The gunslinger snapped awake, waving at something with his mutilated hand, sure that in a moment one of the monstrous shelled things from the Western Sea would drop on him, desperately enquiring in its foreign tongue as it pulled his face off his skull.

Instead a sea-bird, attracted by the glister of the morning sun on the buttons of his shirt, wheeled away with a frightened squawk.

Roland sat up.

His hand throbbed wretchedly, endlessly. His right foot did the same. Both fingers and toe continued to insist they were there. The bottom half of his shirt was gone; what was left resembled a ragged vest. He had used one piece to bind his hand, the other to bind his foot.

Go away, he told the absent parts of his body. You are ghosts now. Go away.

It helped a little. Not much, but a little. They were ghosts, all right, but lively ghosts.

The gunslinger ate jerky. His mouth wanted it little, his stomach less, but he insisted. When it was inside him, he felt a little stronger. There was not much left, though; he was nearly up against it.

Yet things needed to be done.

He rose unsteadily to his feet and looked about. Birds swooped and dived, but the world seemed to belong to only him and them. The monstrosities were gone. Perhaps they were nocturnal; perhaps tidal. At the moment it seemed to make no difference.

The sea was enormous, meeting the horizon at a misty blue point that was impossible to determine. For a long moment the gunslinger forgot his agony in



its contemplation. He had never seen such a body of water. Had heard of it in children's stories, of course, had even been assured by his teachers—some, at least—that it existed—but to actually see it, this immensity, this amazement of water after years of arid land, was difficult to accept. . . difficult to even see.

He looked at it for a long time, enrapt, making himself see it, temporarily forgetting his pain in wonder.

But it was morning, and there were still things to be done.

He felt for the jawbone in his back pocket, careful to lead with the palm of his right hand, not wanting the stubs of his fingers to encounter it if it was still there, changing that hand's ceaseless sobbing to screams.

It was.

All right.

Next.

He clumsily unbuckled his gunbelts and laid them on a sunny rock. He removed the guns, swung the chambers out, and removed the useless shells. He threw them away. A bird settled on the bright gleam tossed back by one of them, picked it up in its beak, then dropped it and flew away.

The guns themselves must be tended to, should have been tended to before this, but since no gun in this world or any other was more than a club without ammunition, he laid the gunbelts themselves over his lap before doing anything else and carefully ran his left hand over the leather.

Each of them was damp from buckle and clasp to the point where the belts would cross his hips; from that point they seemed dry. He carefully removed each shell from the dry portions of the belts. His right hand kept trying to do this job, insisted on forgetting its reduction in spite of the pain, and he found himself returning it to his knee again and again, like a dog too stupid or fractious to heel. In his distracted pain he came close to swatting it once or twice.

I see serious problems ahead, he thought again.

He put these shells, hopefully still good, in a pile that was dishearteningly small. Twenty. Of those, a few would almost certainly misfire. He could depend on none of them. He removed the rest and put them in another pile. Thirty-seven. Well, you weren't heavy loaded, anyway, he thought, but he recognized the difference between fifty-seven live rounds and what might be twenty. Or ten. Or five. Or one. Or none.

He put the dubious shells in a second pile.

He still had his purse. That was one thing. He put it in his lap and then slowly disassembled his guns and performed the ritual of cleaning. By the time he was finished, two hours had passed and his pain was so intense his head reeled with it; conscious thought had become difficult. He wanted to sleep. He had never wanted that more in his life/But in the service of duty there was never any acceptable reason for denial.

"Cort," he said in a voice that he couldn't recognize, and laughed dryly.

Slowly, slowly, he reassembled his revolvers and loaded them with the shells he presumed to be dry. When the job was done, he held the one made for his left hand, cocked it... and then slowly lowered the hammer again. He wanted to know, yes. Wanted to know if there would be a satisfying report when he squeezed the trigger or only another of those useless clicks. But a click would mean nothing, and a report would only reduce twenty to nineteen... or nine... or three... or none.

He tore away another piece of his shirt, put the other shells—the ones which had been wetted—in it, and tied it, using his left hand and his teeth. He put them in his purse.

Sleep, his body demanded. Sleep, you must sleep, now, before dark, there's nothing left, you're used up—

He tottered to his feet and looked up and down the deserted strand. It was the color of an undergarment which has gone a long time without washing, littered with sea-shells which had no color. Here and there large rocks protruded from the gross-grained sand, and these were covered with guano, the older layers the yellow of ancient teeth, the fresher splotches white.

The high-tide line was marked with drying kelp. He could see pieces of his right boot and his waterskins lying near that line. He thought it almost a miracle that the skins hadn't been washed out to sea by high-surfing waves. Walking slowly, limping exquisitely, the gunslinger made his way to where they were. He picked up one of them and shook it by his ear. The other was empty. This one still had a little water left in it. Most would not have been able to tell the difference between the two, but the gunslinger knew each just as well as a mother knows which of her identical twins is which. He had been travelling with these waterskins for a long, long time. Water sloshed inside. That was good—a gift. Either the creature which had attacked him or any of the others could have torn this or the other open with one casual bite or slice of claw, but none had and the tide had spared it. Of the creature itself there was no sign, although the two of them had finished far above the tide-line. Perhaps other predators had taken it; perhaps its own kind had given it a burial at sea, as the elaphaunts, giant creatures of whom he had heard in child-hood stories, were reputed to bury their own dead.

He lifted the waterskin with his left elbow, drank deeply, and felt some strength come back into him. The right boot was of course ruined. . . but then he felt a spark of hope. The foot itself was intact—scarred but intact—and it might be possible to cut the other down to match it, to make something which would last at least awhile. . . .

Faintness stole over him. He fought it but his knees unhinged and he sat down, stupidly biting his tongue.

You won't fall unconscious, he told himself grimly. Not here, not where another of those things can come back tonight and finish the job.

So he got to his feet and tied the empty skin about his waist, but he had only gone twenty yards back toward the place where he had left his guns and purse when he fell down again, half-fainting. He lay there awhile, one cheek pressed against the sand, the edge of a seashell biting against the edge of his jaw almost deep enough to draw blood. He managed to drink from the waterskin, and then he crawled back to the place where he had awakened. There was a Joshua tree twenty yards up the slope—it was stunted, but it would offer at least some shade.

To Roland the twenty yards looked like twenty miles.

Nonetheless, he laboriously pushed what remained of his possessions into that little puddle of shade. He lay there with his head in the grass, already fading toward what could be sleep or unconsciousness or death. He looked into the sky and tried to judge the time. Not noon, but the size of the puddle of shade in which he rested said noon was close. He held on a moment longer, turning his right arm over and bringing it close to his eyes, looking for the telltale red

lines of infection, of some poison seeping steadily toward the middle of him. The palm of his hand was a dull red. Not a good sign. I jerk off left-handed, he thought, at least that's some-thing. Then darkness took him, and he slept for the next sixteen hours with the sound of the Western Sea pounding ceaselessly in his dreaming ears.

3

When the gunslinger awoke again the sea was dark but there was faint light in the sky to the east. Morning was on its way. He sat up and waves of dizziness almost overcame him.

He bent his head and waited.

When the faintness had passed, he looked at his hand. It was infected, all right—a tell-tale red swelling that spread up the palm and to the wrist. It stopped there, but already he could see the faint beginnings of other red lines, which would lead eventually to his heart and kill him. He felt hot, feverish. I need medicine, he thought. But there is no medicine here.

Had he come this far just to die, then? He would not. And if he were to die in spite of his determination, he would die on his way to the Tower.

How remarkable you are, gunslinger! the man in black tittered inside his head.

How indomitable! How romantic in your stupid obsession!

"Fuck you," he croaked, and drank. Not much water left, either. There was a whole sea in front of him, for all the good it could do him; water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink. Never mind.

He buckled on his gunbelts, tied them—this was a process which took so long that before he was done the first faint light of dawn had brightened to the day's actual prologue—and then tried to stand up. He was not convinced he could do it until it was done.

Holding to the Joshua tree with his left hand, he scooped up the not-quite-empty waterskin with his right arm and slung it over his shoulder. Then his purse.

When he straightened the faintness washed over him again and he put his head down, waiting, willing.

The faintness passed.

Walking with the weaving, wavering steps of a man in the last stages of ambulatory drunkenness, the gunslinger made his way back down to the strand. He stood, looking at an ocean as dark as mulberry wine, and then took the last of his jerky from his purse. He ate half, and this time both mouth and stomach accepted a little more willingly. He turned and ate the other half as he watched the sun come up over the mountains where Jake had died—first seeming to catch on the cruel and treeless teeth of those peaks, then rising above them.

Roland held his face to the sun, closed his eyes, and smiled. He ate the rest of his jerky.

He thought: Very well. I am now a man with no food, with two less fingers and one less toe than I was born with; I am a gunslinger with shells which may not fire; I am sickening from a monster's bite and have no medicine; I have a day's water if I'm lucky; I may be able to walk perhaps a dozen miles if I press myself to the last extremity. I am, in short, a man on the edge of everything.

Which way should he walk? He had come from the east; he could not walk west without the powers of a saint or a savior. That left north and south.

North.

That was the answer his heart told. There was no question in it.

North.

The gunslinger began to walk.

4

He walked for three hours. He fell twice, and the second time he did not believe he would be able to get up again. Then a wave came toward him, close enough to make him remember his guns, and he was up before he knew it, standing on legs that quivered like stilts.

He thought he had managed about four miles in those three hours. Now the sun was growing hot, but not hot enough to explain the way his head pounded or the sweat pouring down his face; nor was the breeze from the sea strong enough to explain the sudden fits of shuddering which sometimes gripped him, making his body lump into gooseflesh and his teeth chatter.

Fever, gunslinger, the man in black tittered. What's left inside you has been touched afire.

The red lines of inlet lion were more pronounced now; they had marched upward from his right wrist halfway to his elbow.

He made another mile and drained his waterbag dry. He tied it around his waist with the other. The landscape was monotonous and unpleasing. The sea to his right, the mountains to his left, the gray, shell-littered sand under the feet of his cut-down boots. The waves came and went. He looked for the lobster-like things and saw none. He walked out of nowhere toward nowhere, a man from another time who, it seemed, had reached a point of pointless ending.

Shortly before noon he fell again and knew he could not get up. This was the place, then. Here. This was the end, after all.

On his hands and knees, he raised his head like a groggy fighter . . . and some distance ahead, perhaps a mile, perhaps three (it was difficult to judge distances along the unchanging reach of the strand with the fever working inside him, making his eyeballs pulse in and out), he saw something new. Something which stood upright on the beach.

What was it?

(three)

Didn't matter.

(three is the number of your fate)

The gunslinger managed to get to his feet again. He croaked something, some plea which only the circling sea-birds heard (and how happy they would be to gobble my eyes from my head, he thought, how happy to have such a tasty bit!), and walked on, weaving more seriously now, leaving tracks behind him that were weird loops and swoops.

He kept his eyes on whatever it was that stood on the strand ahead. When his hair fell in his eyes he brushed it aside. It seemed to grow no closer. The sun reached the roof of the sky, where it seemed to remain far too long. Roland imagined he was in the desert again, somewhere between the last out-lander's hut (the musical fruit the more you eat the more you toot)

and the way-station where the boy

(your Isaac)

had awaited his coming.

His knees buckled, straightened, buckled, straightened again. When his hair fell

in his eyes once more he did not bother to push it back; did not have the strength to push it back. He looked at the object, which now cast a narrow shadow back toward the upland, and kept walking.

He could make it out now, fever or no fever.

It was a door.

Less than a quarter of a mile from it, Roland's knees buckled again and this time he could not stiffen their hinges. He fell, his right hand dragged across gritty sand and shells, the stumps of his fingers screamed as fresh scabs were scored away. The stumps began to bleed again.

So he crawled. Crawled with the steady rush, roar, and retreat of the Western Sea in his ears. He used his elbows and his knees, digging grooves in the sand above the twist of dirty green kelp which marked the high-tide line. He supposed the wind was still blowing—it must be, for the chills continued to whip through his body—but the only wind he could hear was the harsh gale which gusted in and out of his own lungs.

The door grew closer.

Closer.

At last, around three o'clock of that long delirious day, with his shadow beginning to grow long on his left, he reached it. He sat back on his haunches and regarded it wearily.

It stood six and a half feet high and appeared to be made of solid ironwood, although the nearest ironwood tree must grow seven hundred miles or more from here. The doorknob looked as if it were made of gold, and it was filigreed with a design which the gunslinger finally recognized: it was the grinning face of the baboon.

There was no keyhole in the knob, above it, or below it.

The door had hinges, but they were fastened to nothing—or so it seems, the gunslinger thought. This is a mystery, a most marvellous mystery, but does it really matter? You are dying. Your own mystery—the only one that really matters to any man or woman in the end—approaches.

All the same, it did seem to matter.

This door. This door where no door should be. It simply stood there on the gray strand twenty feet above the high tide line, seemingly as eternal as the sea itself, now casting the slanted shadow of its thickness toward the east as the sun westered.

Written upon it in black letters two-thirds of the way up, written in the high speech, were two words:

## THE PRISONER

A demon has infested him. The name of the demon is HEROIN.

The gunslinger could hear a low droning noise. At first he thought it must be the wind or a sound in his own feverish head, but he became more and more convinced that the sound was the sound of motors . . . and that it was coming from behind the door.

Open it then. It's not locked. You know it's not locked.

Instead he tottered gracelessly to his feet and walked above the door and around to the other side.

There was no other side.

Only the dark gray strand, stretching back and back. Only the waves, the shells,

the high-tide line, the marks of his own approach—bootprints and holes that had been made by his elbows. He looked again and his eyes widened a little. The door wasn't here, but its shadow was.

He started to put out his right hand—oh, it was so slow learning its new place in what was left of his life—dropped it, and raised his left instead. He groped, feeling for hard resistance.

If I feel it I'll knock on nothing, the gunslinger thought. That would be an interesting thing to do before dying!

His hand encountered thin air far past the place where the door—even if invisible—should have been.

Nothing to knock on.

And the sound of motors—if that's what it really had been—was gone. Now there was just the wind, the waves, and the sick buzzing inside his head.

The gunslinger walked slowly back to the other side of what wasn't there, already thinking it had been a hallucination to start with, a—

He stopped.

At one moment he had been looking west at an uninterrupted view of a gray, rolling wave, and then his view was interrupted by the thickness of the door. He could see its keyplate, which also looked like gold, with the latch protruding from it like a stubby metal tongue. Roland moved his head an inch to the north and the door was gone. Moved it back to where it had been and it was there again. It did not appear; it was just there.

He walked all the way around and faced the door, swaying.

He could walk around on the sea side, but he was convinced that the same thing would happen, only this time he would fall down.

I wonder if I could go through it from the nothing side?

Oh, there were all sorts of things to wonder about, but the truth was simple: here stood this door alone on an endless stretch of beach, and it was for only one of two things: opening or leaving closed.

The gunslinger realized with dim humor that maybe he wasn't dying quite as fast as he thought. If he had been, would he feel this scared?

He reached out and grasped the doorknob with his left hand. Neither the deadly cold of the metal or the thin, fiery heat of the runes engraved upon it surprised him.

He turned the knob. The door opened toward him when he pulled.

Of all the things he might have expected, this was not any of them.

The gunslinger looked, froze, uttered the first scream of terror in his adult life, and slammed the door. There was nothing for it to bang shut on, but it banged shut just the same, sending seabirds screeching up from the rocks on which they had perched to watch him.

5

What he had seen was the earth from some high, impossible distance in the sky—miles up, it seemed. He had seen the shadows of clouds lying upon that earth, floating across it like dreams. He had seen what an eagle might see if one could fly thrice as high as any eagle could.

To step through such a door would be to fall, screaming, for what might be minutes, and to end by driving one's self deep into the earth.

No, you saw more.

He considered it as he sat stupidly on the sand in front of the closed door with his wounded hand in his lap. The first faint tracers had appeared above his elbow now. The infection would reach his heart soon enough, no doubt about that.

It was the voice of Cort in his head.

Listen to me, maggots. Listen for your lives, for that's what it could mean some day. You never see all that you see. One of the things they send you to me for is to show you what you don't see in what you see—what you don't see when you're scared, or fighting, or running, or fucking. No man sees all that he sees, but before you're gunslingers—those of you who don't go west, that is—you'll see more in one single glance than some men see in a lifetime. And some of what you don't see in that glance you'll see afterwards, in the eye of your memory—if you live long enough to remember, that is. Because the difference between seeing and not seeing can be the difference between living and dying.

He had seen the earth from this huge height (and it had somehow been more dizzying and distorting than the vision of growth which had come upon him shortly before the end of his time with the man in black, because what he had seen through the door had been no vision), and what little remained of his attention had registered the fact that the land he was seeing was neither desert nor sea but some green place of incredible lushness with interstices of water that made him think it was a swamp, but—

What little remained of your attention, the voice of Cort mimicked savagely. You saw more!

Yes.

He had seen white.

White edges.

Bravo, Roland! Cort cried in his mind, and Roland seemed to feel the swat of that hard, callused hand. He winced.

He had been looking through a window.

The gunslinger stood with an effort, reached forward, felt cold and burning lines of thin heat against his palm. He opened the door again.

6

The view he had expected—that view of the earth from some horrendous, unimaginable height—was gone. He was looking at words he didn't understand. He almost understood them; it was as if the Great Letters had been twisted. . . .

Above the words was a picture of a horseless vehicle, a motor-car of the sort which had supposedly filled the world before it moved on. Suddenly he thought of the things Jake had said when, at the way station, the gunslinger had hypno-tized him.

This horseless vehicle with a woman wearing a fur stole laughing beside it, could be whatever had run Jake over in that strange other world.

This is that other world, the gunslinger thought.

Suddenly the view . . .

It did not change; it moved. The gunslinger wavered on his feet, feeling vertigo and a touch of nausea. The words and the picture descended and now he saw an aisle with a double row of seats on the far side. A few were empty, but there were men in most of them, men in strange dress. He supposed they were suits, but he had never seen any like them before. The things around their necks could

likewise be ties or cravats, but he had seen none like these, either. And, so far as he could tell, not one of them was armed—he saw no dagger nor sword, let alone a gun. What kind of trusting sheep were these? Some read papers covered with tiny words—words broken here and there with pictures—while others wrote on papers with pens of a sort the gunslinger had never seen. But the pens mattered little to him. It was the paper. He lived in a world where paper and gold were valued in rough equivalency. He had never seen so much paper in his life. Even now one of the men tore a sheet from the yellow pad which lay upon his lap and crumpled it into a ball, although he had only written on the top half of one side and not at all on the other. The gunslinger was not too sick to feel a twinge of horror and outrage at such unnatural profligacy.

Beyond the men was a curved white wall and a row of windows. A few of these were covered by some sort of shutters, but he could see blue sky beyond others.

Now a woman approached the doorway, a woman wear-ing what looked like a uniform, but of no sort Roland had ever seen. It was bright red, and part of it was pants. He could see the place where her legs became her crotch. This was nothing he had ever seen on a woman who was not undressed.

She came so close to the door that Roland thought she would walk through, and he blundered back a step, lucky not to fall. She looked at him with the practiced solicitude of a woman who is at once a servant and no one's mistress but her own. This did not interest the gunslinger. What interested him was that her expression never changed. It was not the way you expected a woman—anybody, for that matter—to look at a dirty, swaying, exhausted man with revolvers crisscrossed on his hips, a blood-soaked rag wrapped around his right hand, and jeans which looked as if they'd been worked on with some kind of buzzsaw.

"Would you like. . ." the woman in red asked. There was more, but the gunslinger didn't understand exactly what it meant. Food or drink, he thought. That red cloth—it was not cotton. Silk? It looked a little like silk, but—

"Gin," a voice answered, and the gunslinger understood that. Suddenly he understood much more:

It wasn't a door.

It was eyes.

Insane as it might seem, he was looking at part of a carriage that flew through the sky. He was looking through someone's eyes.

Whose?

But he knew. He was looking through the eyes of the prisoner.

## CHAPTER 2 EDDIE DEAN

1

As if to confirm this idea, mad as it was, what the gun-slinger was looking at through the doorway suddenly rose and slid sideways. The view turned (that feeling of vertigo again, a feeling of standing still on a plate with wheels under it, a plate which hands he could not see moved this way and that), and then the aisle was flowing past the edges of the doorway. He passed a place where several women, all dressed in the same red uniforms, stood. This was a



place of steel things, and he would have liked to make the moving view stop in spite of his pain and exhaustion so he could see what the steel things were—machines of some sort. One looked a bit like an oven. The army woman he had already seen was pouring the gin which the voice had requested. The bottle she poured from was very small. It was glass. The vessel she was pouring it into looked like glass but the gunslinger didn't think it actually was.

What the doorway showed had moved along before he could see more. There was another of those dizzying turns and he was looking at a metal door. There was a lighted sign in a small oblong. This word the gunslinger could read. VACANT, it said.

The view slid down a little. A hand entered it from the right of the door the gunslinger was looking through and grasped the knob of the door the gunslinger was looking at. He saw the cuff of a blue shirt, slightly pulled back to reveal crisp curls of black hair. Long fingers. A ring on one of them, with a jewel set into it that might have been a ruby or a firedim or a piece of trumpery trash.

The gunslinger rather thought it this last—it was too big and vulgar to be real. The metal door swung open and the gunslinger was looking into the strangest privy he had ever seen. It was all metal.

The edges of the metal door flowed past the edges of the door on the beach. The gunslinger heard the sound of it being closed and latched. He was spared another of those giddy spins, so he supposed the man through whose eyes he was watching must have reached behind himself to lock himself in.

Then the view did turn—not all the way around but half—and he was looking into a mirror, seeing a face he had seen once before... on a Tarot card. The same dark eyes and spill of dark hair. The face was calm but pale, and in the eyes—eyes through which he saw now reflected back at him—Roland saw some of the dread and horror of that baboon-ridden creature on the Tarot card.

The man was shaking.

He's sick, too.

Then he remembered Nort, the weed-eater in Tull.

He thought of the Oracle.

A demon has infested him.

The gunslinger suddenly thought he might know what HEROIN was after all: something like the devil-grass.

A trifle upsetting, isn't he?

Without thought, with the simple resolve that had made him the last of them all, the last to continue marching on and on long after Cuthbert and the others had died or given up, committed suicide or treachery or simply recanted the whole idea of the Tower; with the single-minded and incurious resolve that had driven him across the desert and all the years before the desert in the wake of the man in black, the gunsling-er stepped through the doorway.

2

Eddie ordered a gin and tonic—maybe not such a good idea to be going into New York Customs drunk, and he knew once he got started he would just keep on going—but he had to have something.

When you got to get down and you can't find the elevator, Henry had told him once, you got to do it any way you can. Even if it's only with a shovel.

Then, after he'd given his order and the stewardess had left, he started to feel

like he was maybe going to vomit. Not for sure going to vomit, only maybe, but it was better to be safe. Going through Customs with a pound of pure cocaine under each armpit with gin on your breath was not so good; going through Customs that way with puke drying on your pants would be disaster. So better to be safe. The feeling would probably pass, it usually did, but better to be safe.

Trouble was, he was going cool turkey. Cool, not cold. More words of wisdom from that great sage and eminent junkie Henry Dean.

They had been sitting on the penthouse balcony of the Regency Tower, not quite on the nod but edging toward it, the sun warm on their faces, done up so good. . . back in the good old days, when Eddie had just started to snort the stuff and Henry himself had yet to pick up his first needle.

Everybody talks about going cold turkey, Henry had said, but before you get there, you gotta go cool turkey.

And Eddie, stoned out of his mind, had cackled madly, because he knew exactly what Henry was talking about. Henry, however, had not so much as cracked a smile.

In some ways cool turkey's worse than cold turkey, Henry said. At least when you make it to cold turkey, you KNOW you're gonna puke, you KNOW you're going to shake, you KNOW you're gonna sweat until it feels like you're drowning in it.

Cool turkey is, like, the curse of expectation.

Eddie remembered asking Henry what you called it when a needle-freak (which, in those dim dead days which must have been all of sixteen months ago, they had both solemnly assured themselves they would never become) got a hot shot.

You call that baked turkey, Henry had replied promptly, and then had looked surprised, the way a person does when he's said something that turned out to be a lot funnier than he actually thought it would be, and they looked at each other, and then they were both howling with laughter and clutching each other.

Baked turkey, pretty funny, not so funny now.

Eddie walked up the aisle past the galley to the head, checked the sign—VACANT—and opened the door.

Hey Henry, o great sage if eminent junkie big brother, while we're on the subject of our feathered friends, you want to hear my definition of cooked goose? That's when the Customs guy at Kennedy decides there's something a little funny about the way you look, or it's one of the days when they got the dogs with the PhD noses out there instead of at Port Authority and they all start to bark and pee all over the floor and it's you they're all just about strangling themselves on their choke-chains trying to get to, and after the Customs guys toss all your luggage they take you into the little room and ask you if you'd mind taking off your shirt and you say yeah I sure would I'd mind like hell, I picked up a little cold down in the Bahamas and the air-conditioning in here is real high and I'm afraid it might turn into pneumonia and they say oh is that so, do you always sweat like that when the air-conditioning's too high, Mr. Dean, you do, well, excuse us all to hell, now do it, and you do it, and they say maybe you better take off the t-shirt too, because you look like maybe you got some kind of a medical problem, buddy, those bulges under your pits look like maybe they could be some kind of lymphatic tumors or something, and you don't even bother to say anything else, it's like a center-fielder who doesn't even bother to chase the ball when it's hit a certain way, he just turns around and watches it go into the upper deck, because when it's gone it's gone, so you take off the t-shirt and hey, looky here, you're some lucky kid, those aren't

tumors, unless they're what you might call tumors on the corpus of society, yuk-yuk-yuk, those things look more like a couple of baggies held there with Scotch strapping tape, and by the way, don't worry about that smell, son, that's just goose. It's cooked.

He reached behind him and pulled the locking knob. The lights in the head brightened. The sound of the motors was a soft drone. He turned toward the mirror, wanting to see how bad he looked, and suddenly a terrible, pervasive feeling swept over him: a feeling of being watched.

Hey, come on, quit it, he thought uneasily. You're supposed to be the most unparanoid guy in the world. That's why they sent you. That's why— But it suddenly seemed those were not his own eyes in the mirror, not Eddie Dean's hazel, almost-green eyes that had melted so many hearts and allowed him to part so many pretty sets of legs during the last third of his twenty-one years, not his eyes but those of a stranger. Not hazel but a blue the color of fading Levis. Eyes that were chilly, precise, unexpected marvels of calibration. Bombardier's eyes.

Reflected in them he saw—clearly saw—a seagull swoop-ing down over a breaking wave and snatching something from it.

He had time to think What in God's name is this shit? and then he knew it wasn't going to pass; he was going to throw up after all.

In the half-second before he did, in the half-second he went on looking into the mirror, he saw those blue eyes disappear . . . but before that happened there was suddenly the feeling of being two people ... of being possessed, like the little girl in *The Exorcist*.

Clearly he felt a new mind inside his own mind, and heard a thought not as his own thought but more like a voice from a radio: I've come through. I'm in the sky-carriage.

There was something else, but Eddie didn't hear it. He was too busy throwing up into the basin as quietly as he could.

When he was done, before he had even wiped his mouth, something happened which had never happened to him before. For one frightening moment there was nothing—only a blank interval. As if a single line in a column of newsprint had been neatly and completely inked out.

What is this? Eddie thought helplessly. What the hell is this shit?

Then he had to throw up again, and maybe that was just as well; whatever you might say against it, regurgitation had at least this much in its favor: as long as you were doing it, you couldn't think of anything else.

3

I've come through. I'm in the sky-carriage, the gunslinger thought. And, a second later: He sees me in the mirror!

Roland pulled back—did not leave but pulled back, like a child retreating to the furthest corner of a very long room. He was inside the sky-carriage; he was also inside a man who was not himself. Inside *The Prisoner*. In that first moment, when he had been close to the front (it was the only way he could describe it), he had been more than inside; he had almost been the man. He felt the man's illness, whatever it was, and sensed that the man was about to retch. Roland understood that if he needed to, he could take control of this man's body. He would suffer his pains, would be ridden by whatever demon-ape rode him, but if

he needed to he could.

Or he could stay back here, unnoticed.

When the prisoner's fit of vomiting had passed, the gun-slinger leaped forward—this time all the way to the front. He understood very little about this strange situation, and to act in a situation one does not understand is to invite the most terrible consequences, but there were two things he needed to know—and he needed to know them so desperately that the needing outweighed any consequences which might arise.

Was the door he had come through from his own world still there?

And if it was, was his physical self still there, collapsed, untenanted, perhaps dying or already dead without his self's self to go on unthinkingly running lungs and heart and nerves? Even if his body still lived, it might only continue to do so until night fell. Then the lobstrosities would come out to ask their questions and look for shore dinners.

He snapped the head which was for a moment his head around in a fast backward glance.

The door was still there, still behind him. It stood open on his own world, its hinges buried in the steel of this peculiar privy. And, yes, there he lay, Roland, the last gunslinger, lying on his side, his bound right hand on his stomach.

I'm breathing, Roland thought. I'll have to go back and move me. But there are things to do first. Things . . .

He let go of the prisoner's mind and retreated, watching, waiting to see if the prisoner knew he was there or not.

4

After the vomiting stopped, Eddie remained bent over the basin, eyes tightly closed.

Blanked there for a second. Don't know what it was. Did I look around?

He groped for the faucet and ran cool water. Eyes still closed, he splashed it over his cheeks and brow.

When it could be avoided no longer, he looked up into the mirror again.

His own eyes looked back at him.

There were no alien voices in his head.

No feeling of being watched.

You had a momentary fugue, Eddie, the great sage and eminent junkie advised him.

A not uncommon phenomenon in one who is going cool turkey.

Eddie glanced at his watch. An hour and a half to New York. The plane was scheduled to land at 4:05 EDT, but it was really going to be high noon. Showdown time.

He went back to his seat. His drink was on the divider. He took two sips and the stew came back to ask him if she could do any thing else for him. He opened his mouth to say no. . .and then there was another of those odd blank moments.

5

"I'd like something to eat, please," the gunslinger said through Eddie Dean's mouth.

"We'll be serving a hot snack in—"

"I'm really starving, though," the gunslinger said with perfect truthfulness.  
"Anything at all, even a popkin—"  
"Popkin?" the army woman frowned at him, and the gunslinger suddenly looked into the prisoner's mind. Sandwich . . . the word was as distant as the murmur in a conch shell.  
"A sandwich, even," the gunslinger said.  
The army woman looked doubtful. "Well... I have some tuna fish ..."  
"That would be fine," the gunslinger said, although he had never heard of tooter fish in his life. Beggars could not be choosers.  
"You do look a little pale," the army woman said. "I thought maybe it was air-sickness."  
"Pure hunger."  
She gave him a professional smile. "I'll see what I can rustle up."  
Russel? the gunslinger thought dazedly. In his own world to russel was a slang verb meaning to take a woman by force. Never mind. Food would come. He had no idea if he could carry it back through the doorway to the body which needed it so badly, but one thing at a time, one thing at a time.  
Russel, he thought, and Eddie Dean's head shook, as if in disbelief.  
Then the gunslinger retreated again.

6

Nerves, the great oracle and eminent junkie assured him. Just nerves. All part of the cool turkey experience, little brother.  
But if nerves was what it was, how come he felt this odd sleepiness stealing over him—odd because he should have been itchy, ditsy, feeling that urge to squirm and scratch that came before the actual shakes; even if he had not been in Henry's "cool turkey" state, there was the fact that he was about to attempt bringing two pounds of coke through U.S. Customs, a felony punishable by not less than ten years in federal prison, and he seemed to suddenly be having blackouts as well.  
Still, that feeling of sleepiness.  
He sipped at his drink again, then let his eyes slip shut.  
Why'd you black out?  
I didn't, or she'd be running for all the emergency gear they carry.  
Blanked out, then. It's no good either way. You never blanked out like that before in your life. Nodded out, yeah, but never blanked out.  
Something odd about his right hand, too. It seemed to throb vaguely, as if he had pounded it with a hammer.  
He flexed it without opening his eyes. No ache. No throb. No blue bombardier's eyes. As for the blank-outs, they were just a combination of going cool turkey and a good case of what the great oracle and eminent et cetera would no doubt call the smuggler's blues.  
But I'm going to sleep, just the same, he thought. How 'bout that?  
Henry's face drifted by him like an untethered balloon. Don't worry, Henry was saying. You'll be all right, little brother. You fly down there to Nassau, check in at the Aquinas, there'll be a man come by Friday night. One of the good guys. He'll fix you, leave you enough stuff to take you through the weekend. Sunday night he brings the coke and you give him the key to the safe deposit box. Monday morning you do the routine just like Balazar said. This guy will

play; he knows how it's supposed to go. Monday noon you fly out, and with a face as honest as yours, you'll breeze through Customs and we'll be eating steak in Sparks before the sun goes down. It's gonna be a breeze, little brother, nothing but a cool breeze.

But it had been sort of a warm breeze after all.

The trouble with him and Henry was they were like Charlie Brown and Lucy. The only difference was once in awhile Henry would hold onto the football so Eddie could kick it—not often, but once in awhile. Eddie had even thought, while in one of his heroin dazes, that he ought to write Charles Schultz a letter. Dear Mr. Schultz, he would say. You're missing a bet by ALWAYS having Lucy pull the foot-ball up at the last second. She ought to hold it down there once in awhile. Nothing Charlie Brown could ever predict, you understand. Sometimes she'd maybe hold it down for him to kick three, even four times in a row, then nothing for a month, then once, and then nothing for three or four days, and then, you know, you get the idea. That would REALLY fuck the kid up, wouldn't it?

Eddie knew it would really fuck the kid up.

From experience he knew it.

One of the good guys, Henry had said, but the guy who showed up had been a sallow-skinned thing with a British accent, a hairline moustache that looked like something out of a 1940s film noire, and yellow teeth that all leaned inward, like the teeth of a very old animal trap.

"You have the key, Senor?" he asked, except in that Brit-ish public school accent it came out sounding like what you called your last year of high school.

"The key's safe," Eddie said, "if that's what you mean."

"Then give it to me."

"That's not the way it goes. You're supposed to have something to take me through the weekend. Sunday night you're supposed to bring me something. I give you the key. Monday you go into town and use it to get something else. I don't know what, 'cause that's not my business."

Suddenly there was a small flat blue automatic in the sallow-skinned thing's hand. "Why don't you just give it to me, Senor? I will save time and effort; you will save your life."

There was deep steel in Eddie Dean, junkie or no junkie. Henry knew it; more important, Balazar knew it. That was why he had been sent. Most of them thought he had gone because he was hooked through the bag and back again. He knew it, Henry knew it, Balazar, too. But only he and Henry knew he would have gone even if he was as straight as a stake. For Henry. Balazar hadn't got quite that far in his figuring, but fuck Balazar.

"Why don't you just put that thing away, you little scuzz?" Eddie asked. "Or do you maybe want Balazar to send someone down here and cut your eyes out of your head with a rusty knife?"

The sallow thing smiled. The gun was gone like magic; in its place was a small envelope. He handed it to Eddie. "Just a little joke, you know."

"If you say so."

"I see you Sunday night."

He turned toward the door.

"I think you better wait."

The sallow thing turned back, eyebrows raised. "You think I won't go if I want to go?"

"I think if you go and this is bad shit, I'll be gone tomor-row. Then you'll be

in deep shit."

The sallow thing turned sulky. It sat in the room's single easy chair while Eddie opened the envelope and spilled out a small quantity of brown stuff. It looked evil. He looked at the sallow thing.

"I know how it looks, it looks like shit, but that's just the cut," the sallow thing said. "It's fine."

Eddie tore a sheet of paper from the notepad on the desk and separated a small amount of the brown powder from the pile. He fingered it and then rubbed it on the roof of his mouth. A second later he spat into the wastebasket.

"You want to die? Is that it? You got a death-wish?"

"That's all there is." The sallow thing looked more sulky than ever.

"I have a reservation out tomorrow," Eddie said. This was a lie, but he didn't believe the sallow thing had the resources to check it. "TWA. I did it on my own, just in case the contact happened to be a fuck-up like you. I don't mind. It'll be a relief, actually. I wasn't cut out for this sort of work."

The sallow thing sat and cogitated. Eddie sat and concentrated on not moving. He felt like moving; felt like slipping and sliding, hipping and bopping, shucking and jiving, scratching his scratches and cracking his crackers. He even felt his eyes wanting to slide back to the pile of brown powder, although he knew it was poison. He had fixed at ten that morning; the same number of hours had gone by since then. But if he did any of those things, the situation would change. The sallow thing was doing more than cogitating; it was watching him, trying to calculate the depth of him.

"I might be able to find something," it said at last.

"Why don't you try?" Eddie said. "But come eleven, I turn out the light and put the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door, and anybody that knocks after I do that, I call the desk and say someone's bothering me, send a security guy."

"You are a fuck," the sallow thing said in its impeccable British accent.

"No," Eddie said, "a fuck is what you expected. I came with my legs crossed. You want to be here before eleven with something that I can use—it doesn't have to be great, just something I can use—or you will be one dead scuzz."

The sallow thing was back long before eleven; he was back by nine-thirty. Eddie guessed the other stuff had been in his car all along.

A little more powder this time. Not white, but at least a dull ivory color, which was mildly hopeful.

Eddie tasted. It seemed all right. Actually better than all right. Pretty good.

He rolled a bill and snorted.

"Well, then, until Sunday," the sallow thing said briskly, getting to its feet.

"Wait," Eddie said, as if he were the one with the gun. In a way he was. The gun was Balazar. Emilio Balazar was a high-caliber big shot in New York's wonderful world of drugs.

"Wait?" the sallow thing turned and looked at Eddie as if he believed Eddie must be insane. "For what?"

"Well, I was actually thinking of you," Eddie said. "If I get really sick from what I just put into my body, it's off. If I die, of course it's off. I was just thinking that, if I only get a little sick, I might give you another chance. You know, like that story about how some kid rubs a lamp and gets three wishes."

"It will not make you sick. That's China White."

"If that's China White," Eddie said, "I'm Dwight Gooden."

"Who?"

"Never mind."

The sallow thing sat down. Eddie sat by the motel room desk with the little pile of white powder nearby (the D-Con or whatever it had been had long since gone down the John). On TV the Braves were getting shellacked by the Mets, courtesy of WTBS and the big satellite dish on the Aquinas Hotel's roof. Eddie felt a faint sensation of calm which seemed to come from the back of his mind . . . except where it was really coming from, he knew from what he had read in the medical journals, was from the bunch of living wires at the base of his spine, that place where heroin addiction takes place by causing an unnatural thickening of the nerve stem.

Want to take a quick cure? he had asked Henry once. Break your spine, Henry. Your legs stop working, and so does your cock, but you stop needing the needle right away.

Henry hadn't thought it was funny.

In truth, Eddie hadn't thought it was that funny either. When the only fast way you could get rid of the monkey on your back was to snap your spinal cord above that bunch of nerves, you were dealing with one heavy monkey. That was no capuchin, no cute little organ grinder's mascot; that was a big mean old baboon.

Eddie began to sniffle.

"Okay," he said at last. "It'll do. You can vacate the premises, scuzz."

The sallow thing got up. "I have friends," he said. "They could come in here and do things to you. You'd beg to tell me where that key is."



"Not me, champ," Eddie said. "Not this kid." And smiled. He didn't know how the smile looked, but it must not have looked all that cheery because the sallow thing vacated the premises, vacated them fast, vacated them without looking back.

When Eddie Dean was sure he was gone, he cooked.

Fixed.

Slept.

8

As he was sleeping now.

The gunslinger, somehow inside this man's mind (a man whose name he still did not know; the lowling the prisoner thought of as "the sallow thing" had not known it, and so had never spoken it), watched this as he had once watched plays as a child, before the world had moved on. . . or so he thought he watched, because plays were all he had ever seen. If he had ever seen a moving picture, he would have thought of that first. The things he did not actually see he had been able to pluck from the prisoner's mind because the associations were close. It was odd about the name, though. He knew the name of the prisoner's brother, but not the name of the man himself. But of course names were secret things, full of power.

And neither of the things that mattered was the man's name. One was the weakness of the addiction. The other was the steel buried inside that weakness, like a good gun sinking in quicksand.

This man reminded the gunslinger achingly of Cuthbert.

Someone was coming. The prisoner, sleeping, did not hear. The gunslinger, not sleeping, did, and came forward again.

9

Great, Jane thought. He tells me how hungry he is and I fix something up for him because he's a little bit cute, and then he falls asleep on me.

Then the passenger—a guy of about twenty, tall, wearing clean, slightly faded bluejeans and a paisley shirt—opened his eyes a little and smiled at her.

"Thankee sai," he said—or so it sounded. Almost archaic ... or foreign.

Sleep-talk, that's all, Jane thought.

"You're welcome." She smiled her best stewardess smile, sure he would fall asleep again and the sandwich would still be there, uneaten, when it was time for the actual meal service.

Well, that was what they taught you to expect, wasn't it?

She went back to the galley to catch a smoke.

She struck the match, lifted it halfway to her cigarette, and there it stopped, unnoticed, because that wasn't all they taught you to expect.

I thought he was a little bit cute. Mostly because of his eyes. His hazel eyes.

But when the man in 3A had opened his eyes a moment ago, they hadn't been hazel; they had been blue. Not sweet-sexy blue like Paul Newman's eyes, either, but the color of icebergs. They—

"Ow!"

The match had reached her fingers. She shook it out.

"Jane?" Paula asked. "You all right?"

"Fine. Daydreaming."

She lit another match and this time did the job right. She had only taken a single drag when the perfectly reasonable explanation occurred to her. He wore contacts. Of course. The kind that changed the color of your eyes. He had gone into the bathroom. He had been in there long enough for her to worry about him being airsick—he had that pallid complexion, the look of a man who is not quite well. But he had only been taking out his contact lenses so he could nap more comfortably. Perfectly reasonable.

You may feel something, a voice from her own not-so-distant past spoke suddenly. Some little tickle. You may see something just a little bit wrong.

Colored contact lenses.

Jane Doming personally knew over two dozen people who wore contacts. Most of them worked for the airline. No one ever said anything about it, but she thought maybe one reason was they all sensed the passengers didn't like to see flight personnel wearing glasses—it made them nervous.

Of all those people, she knew maybe four who had color-contacts. Ordinary contact lenses were expensive; colored ones cost the earth. All of the people of Jane's acquaintance who cared to lay out that sort of money were women, all of them extremely vain.

So what? Guys can be vain, too. Why not? He's good-looking.

No. He wasn't. Cute, maybe, but that was as far as it went, and with the pallid complexion he only made it to cute by the skin of his teeth. So why the color-contacts?

Airline passengers are often afraid of flying.

In a world where hijacking and drug-smuggling had become facts of life, airline personnel are often afraid of passengers.

The voice that had initiated these thoughts had been that of an instructor at flight school, a tough old battle-axe who looked as if she could have flown the mail with Wiley Post, saying: Don't ignore your suspicions. If you forget everything else you've learned about coping with potential or actual terrorists, remember this: don't ignore your suspicions. In some cases you'll get a crew who'll say during the debriefing that they didn't have any idea until the guy pulled out a grenade and said hang a left for Cuba or everyone on the aircraft is going to join the jet-stream. But in most cases you get two or three different people—mostly flight attendants, which you women will be in less than a month—who say they felt something. Some little tickle. A sense that the guy in 91C or the young woman in 5A was a little wrong. They felt something, but they did nothing. Did they get fired for that? Christ, no! You can't put a guy in restraints because you don't like the way he scratches his pimples. The real problem is they felt something . . . and then forgot.

The old battle-axe had raised one blunt finger. Jane Doming, along with her fellow classmates, had listened raptly as she said, If you feel that little tickle, don't do anything. . . but that includes not forgetting. Because there's always that one little chance that you just might be able to stop something before it gets started . . . something like an unscheduled twelve-day layover on the tarmac of some shitpot Arab country.

Just colored contacts, but...

Thankee, sai.

Sleep-talk? Or a muddled lapse into some other language?

She would watch, Jane decided.

And she would not forget.

10

Now, the gunslinger thought. Now we'll see, won't we?

He had been able to come from his world into this body through the door on the beach. What he needed to find out was whether or not he could carry things back. Oh, not himself, he was confident that he could return through the door and reenter his own poisoned, sickening body at any time he should desire. But other things? Physical things? Here, for instance, in front of him, was food: something the woman in the uniform had called a tooter-fish sandwich. The gunslinger had no idea what tooter-fish was, but he knew a popkin when he saw it, although this one looked curiously uncooked.

His body needed to eat, and his body would need to drink, but more than either, his body needed some sort of medicine. It would die from the lobster's bite without it. There might be such medicine in this world; in a world where carriages rode through the air far above where even the strongest eagle could fly, anything seemed possible. But it would not matter how much powerful medicine there was here if he could carry nothing physical through the door. You could live in this body, gunslinger, the voice of the man in black whispered deep inside his head. Leave that piece of breathing meat over there for the lobster-things. It's only a husk, anyway.

He would not do that. For one thing it would be the most murderous sort of thievery, because he would not be content to be just a passenger for long, looking out of this man's eyes like a traveller looking out of a coach window at the passing scenery.

For another, he was Roland. If dying was required, he intended to die as Roland. He would die crawling toward the Tower, if that was what was required.

Then the odd harsh practicality that lived beside the romantic in his nature like a tiger with a roe reasserted itself. There was no need to think of dying with the experiment not yet made.

He picked up the popkin. It had been cut in two halves. He held one in each hand. He opened the prisoner's eyes and looked out of them. No one was looking at him (although, in the galley, Jane Doming was thinking about him, and very hard).

Roland turned toward the door and went through, hold-ing the popkin-halves in his hands.

11

First he heard the grinding roar of an incoming wave; next he heard the argument of many sea-birds arising from the closest rocks as he struggled to a sitting position (cowardly buggers were creeping up, he thought, and they would have been taking pecks out of me soon enough, still breathing or no—they're nothing but vultures with a coat of paint); then he became aware that one popkin half—the one in his right hand—had tumbled onto the hard gray sand because he had been holding it with a whole hand when he came through the door and now was—or had been—holding it in a hand which had suffered a forty per cent reduction.

He picked it up clumsily, pinching it between his thumb and ring finger, brushed

as much of the sand from it as he could, and took a tentative bite. A moment later he was wolf-ing it, not noticing the few bits of sand which ground between his teeth. Seconds later he turned his attention to the other half. It was gone in three bites.

The gunslinger had no idea what tooter-fish was—only that it was delicious. That seemed enough.

12

In the plane, no one saw the tuna sandwich disappear. No one saw Eddie Dean's hands grasp the two halves of it tightly enough to make deep thumb-indentations in the white bread.

No one saw the sandwich fade to transparency, then dis-appear, leaving only a few crumbs.

About twenty seconds after this had happened, Jane Doming snuffed her cigarette and crossed the head of the cabin. She got her book from her totebag, but what she really wanted was another look at 3A.

He appeared to be deeply asleep. . . but the sandwich was gone.

Jesus, Jane thought. He didn't eat it; he swallowed it whole. And now he's asleep again? Are you kidding?

Whatever was tickling at her about 3A, Mr. Now-They're-Hazel-Now-They're-Blue, kept right on tickling. Something about him was not right. Something.

## CHAPTER 3 CONTACT AND LANDING

1

Eddie was awakened by an announcement from the co-pilot that they should be landing at Kennedy International, where the visibility was unlimited, the winds out of the west at ten miles an hour, and the temperature a jolly seventy degrees, in forty-five minutes or so. He told them that, if he didn't get another chance, he wanted to thank them one and all for choosing Delta.

He looked around and saw people checking their duty declaration cards and their proofs of citizenship—coming in from Nassau your driver's license and a credit card with a stateside bank listed on it was supposed to be enough, but most still carried passports—and Eddie felt a steel wire start to tighten inside him.

He still couldn't believe he had gone to sleep, and so soundly.

He got up and went to the restroom. The bags of coke under his arms felt as if they were resting easily and firmly, fitting as nicely to the contours of his sides as they had in the hotel room where a soft-spoken American named William Wilson had strapped them on. Following the strapping operation, the man whose name Poe had made famous (Wilson had only looked blankly at Eddie when Eddie made some allusion to this) handed over the shirt. Just an ordinary paisley shirt, a little faded, the sort of thing any frat-boy might wear back on the plane following a short pre-exams holiday . . . except this one was specially tailored to hide unsightly bulges.

"You check everything once before you set down just to be sure," Wilson said,

"but you're gonna be fine."

Eddie didn't know if he was going to be fine or not, but he had another reason for wanting to use the John before the FASTEN SEATBELTS light came on. In spite of all temptation—and most of last night it hadn't been temptation but raging need—he had managed to hold onto the last little bit of what the sallow thing had had the temerity to call China White.

Clearing customs from Nassau wasn't like clearing customs from Haiti or Quincon or Bogota, but there were still people watching. Trained people. He needed any and every edge he could get. If he could go in there a little cooled out, just a little, it might be the one thing that put him over the top.

He snorted the powder, flushed the little twist of paper it had been in down the John, then washed his hands.

Of course, if you make it, you'll never know, will you? he thought. No. He wouldn't. And wouldn't care.

On his way back to his seat he saw the stewardess who had brought him the drink he hadn't finished. She smiled at him. He smiled back, sat down, buckled his seat-belt, took out the flight magazine, turned the pages, and looked at pictures and words. Neither made any impression on them. That steel wire continued to tighten around his gut, and when the FASTEN SEATBELTS light did come on, it took a double turn and cinched tight.

The heroin had hit—he had the sniffles to prove it—but he sure couldn't feel it. One thing he did feel shortly before landing was another of those unsettling periods of blankness . . . short, but most definitely there.

The 727 banked over the water of Long Island Sound and started in.

2

Jane Doming had been in the business class galley, helping Peter and Anne stow the last of the after-meal drinks glasses when the guy who looked like a college kid went into the first class bathroom.

He was returning to his seat when she brushed aside the curtain between business and first, and she quickened her step without even thinking about it, catching him with her smile, making him look up and smile back.

His eyes were hazel again.

All right, all right. He went into the John and took them out before his nap; he went into the John and put them in again afterwards. For Christ's sake, Janey! You're being a goose!

She wasn't, though. It was nothing she could put her finger on, but she was not being a goose.

He's too pale.

So what? Thousands of people are too pale, including your own mother since her gall bladder went to hell.

He had very arresting blue eyes—maybe not as cute as the hazel contacts—but certainly arresting. So why the bother and expense?

Because he likes designer eyes. Isn't that enough?

No.

Shortly before FASTEN SEAT BELTS and final cross-check, she did something she had never done before; she did it with that tough old battle-axe of an instructor in mind. She filled a Thermos bottle with hot coffee and put on the red plastic top without first pushing the stopper into the bottle's throat. She

screwed the top on only until she felt it catch the first thread.

Susy Douglas was making the final approach announcement, telling the geese to extinguish their cigarettes, telling them they would have to stow what they had taken out, telling them a Delta gate agent would meet the flight, telling them to check and make sure they had their duty-declaration cards and proofs of citizenship, telling them it would now be necessary to pick up all cups, glasses and speaker sets.

I'm surprised we don't have to check to make sure they're dry, Jane thought distractedly. She felt her own steel wire wrapping itself around her guts, cinching them tight.

"Get my side," Jane said as Susy hung up the mike.

Susy glanced at the Thermos, then at Jane's face. "Jane? Are you sick? You look as white as a—"

"I'm not sick. Get my side. I'll explain when you get back." Jane glanced briefly at the jump-seats beside the left-hand exit door. "I want to ride shotgun."

"Jane—"

"Get my side."

"All right," Susy said. "All right, Jane. No problem."

Jane Doming sat down in the jump-seat closest to the aisle. She held the Thermos in her hands and made no move to fasten the web-harness. She wanted to keep the Thermos in complete control, and that meant both hands.

Susy thinks I've flipped out.

Jane hoped she had.

If Captain McDonald lands hard, I'm going to have blisters all over my hands.

She would risk it.

The plane was dropping. The man in 3A, the man with the two-tone eyes and the pale face, suddenly leaned down and pulled his travelling bag from under the seat.

This is it, Jane thought. This is where he brings out the grenade or the automatic weapon or whatever the hell he's got.

And the moment she saw it, the very moment, she was going to flip the red top off the Thermos in her slightly trembling hands, and there was going to be one very surprised Friend of Allah rolling around on the aisle floor of Delta Flight 901 while his skin boiled on his face.

3A unzipped the bag.

Jane got ready.

3

The gunslinger thought this man, prisoner or not, was probably better at the fine art of survival than any of the other men he had seen in the air-carriage.

The others were fat things, for the most part, and even those who looked reasonably fit also looked open, unguarded, their faces those of spoiled and cosseted children, the faces of men who would fight— eventually—but who would whine almost endlessly before they did; you could let their guts out onto their shoes and their last expressions would not be rage or agony but stupid surprise.

The prisoner was better. . . but not good enough. Not at all.

The army woman. She saw something. I don't know what, but she saw something wrong. She's awake to him in a way she's not to the others.

The prisoner sat down. Looked at a limp-covered book he thought of as a "Magda-Seen," although who Magda might have been or what she might have seen mattered not a whit to Roland. The gunslinger did not want to look at a book, amazing as such things were; he wanted to look at the woman in the army uniform. The urge to come forward and take control was very great. But he held against it. . . at least for the time being.

The prisoner had gone somewhere and gotten a drug. Not the drug he himself took, nor one that would help cure the gunslinger's sick body, but one that people paid a lot of money for because it was against the law. He would give this drug to his brother, who would in turn give it to a man named Balazar. The deal would be complete when Balazar traded them the kind of drug they took for this one—if, that was, the prisoner was able to correctly perform a ritual unknown to the gun-slinger (and a world as strange as this must of necessity have many strange rituals); it was called Clearing the Customs.

But the woman sees him.

Could she keep him from Clearing the Customs? Roland thought the answer was probably yes. And then? Gaol. And if the prisoner were gaoled, there would be no place to get the sort of medicine his infected, dying body needed.

He must Clear the Customs, Roland thought. He must. And he must go with his brother to this man Balazar. It's not in the plan, the brother won't like it, but he must.

Because a man who dealt in drugs would either know a man or be a man who also cured the sick. A man who could listen to what was wrong and then . . . maybe .

..

He must Clear the Customs, the gunslinger thought.

The answer was so large and simple, so close to him, that he very nearly did not see it at all. It was the drug the prisoner meant to smuggle in that would make Clearing the Customs so difficult, of course; there might be some sort of Oracle who might be consulted in the cases of people who seemed suspicious. Otherwise, Roland gleaned, the Clearing ceremony would be simplicity itself, as crossing a friendly border was in his own world. One made the sign of fealty to that kingdom's monarch—a simple token gesture—and was allowed to pass.

He was able to take things from the prisoner's world to his own. The tooter-fish popkin proved that. He would take the bags of drugs as he had taken the popkin. The prisoner would Clear the Customs. And then Roland would bring the bags of drugs back.

Can you?

Ah, here was a question disturbing enough to distract him from the view of the water below . . . they had gone over what looked like a huge ocean and were now turning back toward the coastline. As they did, the water grew steadily closer.

The air-carriage was coming down (Eddie's glance was brief, cursory; the gunslinger's as rapt as the child seeing his first snowfall). He could take things from this world, that he knew. But bring them back again? That was a thing of which he as yet had no knowing. He would have to find out.

The gunslinger reached into the prisoner's pocket and closed the prisoner's fingers over a coin.

Roland went back through the door.

The birds flew away when he sat up. They hadn't dared come as close this time. He ached; he was woozy, feverish . . . yet it was amazing how much even a little bit of nourishment had revived him.

He looked at the coin he had brought back with him this time. It looked like silver, but the reddish tint at the edge suggested it was really made of some baser metal. On one side was a profile of a man whose face suggested nobility, courage, stubbornness. His hair, both curled at the base of the skull and pigged at the nape of the neck, suggested a bit of vanity as well. He turned the coin over and saw something so startling it caused him to cry out in a rusty, croaking voice.

On the back was an eagle, the device which had decorated his own banner, in those dim days when there had still been kingdoms and banners to symbolize them.

Time's short. Go back. Hurry.

But he tarried a moment longer, thinking. It was harder to think inside this head—the prisoner's was far from clear, but it was, temporarily at least, a cleaner vessel than his own.

To try the coin both ways was only half the experiment, wasn't it?

He took one of the shells from his cartridge belt and folded it over the coin in his hand.

Roland stepped back through the door.

5

The prisoner's coin was still there, firmly curled within the pocketed hand. He didn't have to come forward to check on the shell; he knew it hadn't made the trip.

He came forward anyway, briefly, because there was one thing he had to know. Had to see.

So he turned, as if to adjust the little paper thing on the back of his seat (by all the gods that ever were, there was paper everywhere in this world), and looked through the doorway. He saw his body, collapsed as before, now with a fresh trickle of blood flowing from a cut on his cheek—a stone must have done it when he left himself and crossed over.

The cartridge he had been holding along with the coin lay at the base of the door, on the sand.

Still, enough was answered. The prisoner could Clear the Customs. Their guards o' the watch might search him from head to toe, from asshole to appetite, and back again.

They'd find nothing.

The gunslinger settled back, content, unaware, at least for the time being, that he still had not grasped the extent of his problem.

6

The 727 came in low and smooth over the salt marshes of Long Island, leaving sooty trails of spent fuel behind. The landing gear came down with a rumble and a thump.

7



3A, the man with the two-tone eyes, straightened up and Jane saw—actually saw—a snub-nosed Uzi in his hands before she realized it was nothing but his duty declaration card and a little zipper bag of the sort which men sometimes use to hold their passports.

The plane settled like silk.

Letting out a deep, shaking shudder, she tightened the red top on the Thermos.

"Call me an asshole," she said in a low voice to Susy, buckling the cross-over belts now that it was too late. She had told Susy what she suspected on the final approach, so Susy would be ready. "You have every right."

"No," Susy said. "You did the right thing."

"I over-reacted. And dinner's on me."

"Like hell it is. And don't look at him. Look at me. Smile, Janey."

Jane smiled. Nodded. Wondered what in God's name was going on now.

"You were watching his hands," Susy said, and laughed. Jane joined in. "I was watching what happened to his shirt when he bent over to get his bag. He's got enough stuff under there to stock a Woolworth's notions counter. Only I don't think he's carrying the kind of stuff you can buy at Woolworth's."

Jane threw back her head and laughed again, feeling like a puppet. "How do we handle it?" Susy had five years' senior-ity on her, and Jane, who only a minute ago had felt she had the situation under some desperate kind of control, now only felt glad to have Susy beside her.

"We don't. Tell the Captain while we're taxiing in. The Captain speaks to customs. Your friend there gets in line like everyone else, except then he gets pulled out of line by some men who escort him to a little room. It's going to be the first in a very long succession of little rooms for him, I think."

"Jesus." Jane was smiling, but chills, alternately hot and cold, were racing through her.

She hit the pop-release on her harness when the reverse thrusters began to wind down, handed the Thermos to Susy, then got up and rapped on the cockpit door. Not a terrorist but a drug-smuggler. Thank God for small favors. Yet in a way she hated it. He had been cute.

Not much, but a little.

8

He still doesn't see, the gunslinger thought with anger and dawning desperation. Gods!

Eddie had bent to get the papers he needed for the ritual, and when he looked up the army woman was staring at him, her eyes bulging, her cheeks as white as the paper things on the backs of the seats. The silver tube with the red top, which he had at first taken for some kind of canteen, was apparently a weapon. She was holding it up between her breasts now. Roland thought that in a moment or two she would either throw it or spin off the red top and shoot him with it.

Then she relaxed and buckled her harness even though the thump told both the gunslinger and the prisoner the air carriage had already landed. She turned to the army woman she was sitting with and said something. The other woman laughed and nodded, but if that was a real laugh, the gun-slinger thought, he was a river-toad.

The gunslinger wondered how the man whose mind had become temporary home for the gunslinger's own ka, could be so stupid. Some of it was what he was putting into

his body, of course . . . one of this world's versions of devil-weed. Some, but not all. He was not soft and unobservant like the others, but in time he might be.

They are as they are because they live in the light, the gunslinger thought suddenly. That light of civilization you were taught to adore above all other things. They live in a world which has not moved on.

If this was what people became in such a world, Roland was not sure he didn't prefer the dark. "That was before the world moved on," people said in his own world, and it was always said in tones of bereft sadness . . . but it was, perhaps, sadness without thought, without consideration.

She thought I/ he—meant to grab a weapon when I/he— bent down to get the papers. When she saw the papers she relaxed and did what everyone else did before the carriage came down to the ground again. Now she and her friend are talking and laughing but their faces—her face especially, the face of the woman with the metal tube—are not right. They are talking, all right, but they are only pretending to laugh. . . and that is because what they are talking about is I/ him.

The air-carriage was now moving along what seemed a long concrete road, one of many. Mostly he watched the women, but from the edges of his vision the gunslinger could see other air-carriages moving here and there along other roads. Some lumbered; some moved with incredible speed, not like carriages at all but like projectiles fired from guns or cannons, preparing to leap into the air. As desperate as his own situation had become, part of him wanted very much to come forward and turn his head so he could see these vehicles as they leaped into the sky. They were man-made but every bit as fabulous as the stories of the Grand Featherex which had supposedly once lived in the distant (and probably mythical) kingdom of Garlan—more fabulous, perhaps, simply because these were man-made.

The woman who had brought him the popkin unfastened her harness (this less than a minute since she had fastened it) and went forward to a small door. That's where the driver sits, the gunslinger thought, but when the door was opened and she stepped in he saw it apparently took three drivers to operate the air-carriage, and even the brief glimpse he was afforded of what seemed like a million dials and levers and lights made him understand why.

The prisoner was looking at all but seeing nothing—Cort would have first sneered, then driven him through the nearest wall. The prisoner's mind was completely occupied with grabbing the bag under the seat and his light jacket from the overhead bin . . . and facing the ordeal of the ritual.

The prisoner saw nothing; the gunslinger saw every-thing.

The woman thought him a thief or a madman. He—or perhaps it was I, yes, that's likely enough—did something to make her think that. She changed her mind, and then the other woman changed it back . . . only now I think they know what's really wrong. They know he's going to try to profane the ritual.

Then, in a thunderclap, he saw the rest of his problem. First, it wasn't just a matter of taking the bags into his world as he had the coin; the coin hadn't been stuck to the prisoner's body with the glue-string the prisoner had wrapped around and around his upper body to hold the bags tight to his skin. This glue-string was only part of his problem. The prisoner hadn't missed the temporary disappearance of one coin among many, but when he realized that whatever it was he had risked his life for was suddenly gone, he was surely

going to raise the racks . . . and what then?

It was more than possible that the prisoner would begin to behave in a manner so irrational that it would get him locked away in gaol as quickly as being caught in the act of profanation. The loss would be bad enough; for the bags under his arms to simply melt away to nothing would probably make him think he really had gone mad.

The air-carriage, ox-like now that it was on the ground, labored its way through a left turn. The gunslinger realized that he had no time for the luxury of further thought. He had to do more than come forward; he must make contact with Eddie Dean.

Right now.

9

Eddie tucked his declaration card and passport in his breast pocket. The steel wire was now turning steadily around his guts, sinking in deeper and deeper, making his nerves spark and sizzle. And suddenly a voice spoke in his head. Not a thought; a voice.

Listen to me, fellow. Listen carefully. And if you would remain safe, let your face show nothing which might further rouse the suspicions of those army women. God knows they're suspicious enough already.

Eddie first thought he was still wearing the airline earphones and picking up some weird transmission from the cockpit. But the airline headphones had been picked up five minutes ago.

His second thought was that someone was standing beside him and talking. He almost snapped his head to the left, but that was absurd. Like it or not, the raw truth was that the voice had come from inside his head.

Maybe he was receiving some sort of transmission—AM, FM, or VHF on the fillings in his teeth. He had heard of such th—

Straighten up, maggot! They're suspicious enough without you looking as if you've gone crazy!

Eddie sat up fast, as if he had been whacked. That voice wasn't Henry's, but it was so much like Henry's when they had been just a couple of kids growing up in the Projects, Henry eight years older, the sister who had been between them now only a ghost of memory; Selina had been struck and killed by a car when Eddie was two and Henry ten. That rasping tone of command came out whenever Henry saw him doing some-thing that might end with Eddie occupying a pine box long before his time ... as Selina had.

What in the blue fuck is going on here?

You're not hearing voices that aren't there, the voice inside his head returned.

No, not Henry's voice—older, dryer . . . stronger. But like Henry's voice. . .

and impossible not to believe. That's the first thing. You're not going crazy. I AM another person.

This is telepathy?

Eddie was vaguely aware that his face was completely expressionless. He thought that, under the circumstances, that ought to qualify him for the Best Actor of the Year Academy Award. He looked out the window and saw the plane closing in on the Delta section of Kennedy's International Arrivals Building.

I don't know that word. But I do know that those army women know you are carrying...

There was a pause. A feeling—odder beyond telling—of phantom fingers rummaging through his brain as if he were a living card catalogue.

. . . heroin or cocaine. I can't tell which except—except it must be cocaine because you're carrying the one you don't take to buy the one you do.

"What army women?" Eddie muttered in a low voice. He was completely unaware that he was speaking aloud. "What in the hell are you talking ab—"

That feeling of being slapped once more... so real he felt his head ring with it.

Shut your mouth, you damned jackass!

All right, all right! Christ!

Now that feeling of rummaging fingers again.

Army stewardesses, the alien voice replied. Do you understand me? I have no time to con your every thought, prisoner!

"What did you—" Eddie began, then shut his mouth. What did you call me?

Never mind. Just listen. Time is very, very short. They know. The army stewardesses know you have this cocaine.

How could they? That's ridiculous!

I don't know how they came by their knowledge, and it doesn't matter. One of them told the drivers. The drivers will tell whatever priests perform this ceremony, this Clearing of Customs—

The language of the voice in his head was arcane, the terms so off-kilter they were almost cute . . . but the message came through loud and clear. Although his face remained expressionless, Eddie's teeth came together with a painful click and he drew a hot little hiss in through them.

The voice was saying the game was over. He hadn't even gotten off the plane and the game was already over.

But this wasn't real. No way this could be real. It was just his mind, doing a paranoid little jig at the last minute, that was all. He would ignore it. Just ignore it and it would go awa—

You will NOT ignore it or you will go to jail and I will die! the voice roared.

Who in the name of God are you? Eddie asked reluctantly, fearfully, and inside his head he heard someone or something let out a deep and gusty sigh of relief.

10

He believes, the gunslinger thought. Thank all the gods that are or ever were, he believes!

11

The plane stopped. The FASTEN SEAT BELTS light went out. The jetway rolled forward and bumped against the forward port door with a gentle thump.

They had arrived.

12

There is a place where you can put it while you perform the Clearing of Customs, the voice said. A safe place. Then, when you are away, you can get it again and take it to this man Balazar.

People were standing up now, getting things out of the overhead bins and trying

to deal with coats which were, according to the cockpit announcement, too warm to wear.

Get your bag. Get your jacket. Then go into the privy again.

Pr—

Oh. Bathroom. Head.

If they think I've got dope they'll think I'm trying to dump it.

But Eddie understood that part didn't matter. They wouldn't exactly break down the door, because that might scare the passengers. And they'd know you couldn't flush two pounds of coke down an airline toilet and leave no trace. Not unless the voice was really telling the truth . . . that there was some safe place. But how could there be?

Never mind, damn you! MOVE!

Eddie moved. Because he had finally come alive to the situation. He was not seeing all Roland, with his many years and his training of mingled torture and precision, could see, but he could see the faces of the stewards—the real faces, the ones behind the smiles and the helpful passing of garment bags and cartons stowed in the forward closet. He could see the way their eyes flicked to him, whiplash quick, again and again.

He got his bag. He got his jacket. The door to the jetway had been opened, and people were already moving up the aisle. The door to the cockpit was open, and here was the Captain, also smiling. . . but also looking at the passengers in first class who were still getting their things together, spotting him—no, targeting him—and then looking away again, nodding to someone, tousling a youngster's head.

He was cold now. Not cold turkey, just cold. He didn't need the voice in his head to make him cold. Cold—sometimes that was okay. You just had to be careful you didn't get so cold you froze.

Eddie moved forward, reached the point where a left turn would take him into the jetway—and then suddenly put his hand to his mouth.

"I don't feel well," he murmured. "Excuse me." He moved the door to the cockpit, which slightly blocked the door to the first class head, and opened the bathroom door on the right.

"I'm afraid you'll have to exit the plane," the pilot said sharply as Eddie opened the bathroom door. "It's—"

"I believe I'm going to vomit, and I don't want to do it on your shoes," Eddie said, "or mine, either."

A second later he was in with the door locked. The Captain was saying something. Eddie couldn't make it out, didn't want to make it out. The important thing was that it was just talk, not yelling, he had been right, no one was going to start yelling with maybe two hundred and fifty passengers still waiting to deplane from the single forward door. He was in, he was temporarily safe . . . but what good was it going to do him?

If you're there, he thought, you better do something very quick, whoever you are.

For a terrible moment there was nothing at all. That was a short moment, but in Eddie Dean's head it seemed to stretch out almost forever, like the Bonomo's Turkish Taffy Henry had sometimes bought him in the summer when they were kids; if he were bad, Henry beat the shit out of him, if he were good, Henry bought him Turkish Taffy. That was the way Henry handled his heightened responsibilities during summer vacation.

God, oh Christ, I imagined it all, oh Jesus, how crazy could I have b—  
Get ready, a grim voice said. I can't do it alone. I can COME FORWARD but I  
can't make you COME THROUGH. You have to do it with me. Turn around.  
Eddie was suddenly seeing through two pairs of eyes, feeling with two sets of  
nerves (but not all the nerves of this other person were here; parts of the  
other were gone, freshly gone, screaming with pain), sensing with ten senses,  
thinking with two brains, his blood beating with two hearts.  
He turned around. There was a hole in the side of the bathroom, a hole that  
looked like a doorway. Through it he could see a gray, grainy beach and waves  
the color of old athletic socks breaking upon it.  
He could hear the waves.  
He could smell salt, a smell as bitter as tears in his nose.  
Go through.  
Someone was thumping on the door to the bathroom, telling him to come out, that  
he must deplane at once.  
Go through, damn you!  
Eddie, moaning, stepped toward the doorway . . . stum-bled . . . and fell into  
another world.

13

He got slowly to his feet, aware that he had cut his right palm on an edge of  
shell. He looked stupidly at the blood welling across his lifeline, then saw  
another man rising slowly to his feet on his right.  
Eddie recoiled, his feelings of disorientation and dreamy dislocation suddenly  
supplanted by sharp terror: this man was dead and didn't know it. His face was  
gaunt, the skin stretched over the bones of his face like strips of cloth wound  
around slim angles of metal almost to the point where the cloth must tear itself  
open. The man's skin was livid save for hectic spots of red high on each  
cheekbone, on the neck below the angle of jaw on either side, and a single  
circular mark between the eyes like a child's effort to replicate a Hindu caste  
symbol.  
Yet his eyes—blue, steady, sane—were alive and full of terrible and tenacious  
vitality. He wore dark clothes of some homespun material; the shirt, its sleeves  
rolled up, was a black faded almost to gray, the pants something that looked  
like bluejeans. Gunbelts crisscrossed his hips, but the loops were almost all  
empty. The holsters held guns that looked like .45s—but .45s of an incredibly  
antique vintage. The smooth wood of their handgrips seemed to glow with their  
own inner light.  
Eddie, who didn't know he had any intention of speak-ing—anything to say—heard  
himself saying something never-theless. "Are you a ghost?"  
"Not yet," the man with the guns croaked. "The devil-weed. Cocaine. Whatever you  
call it. Take off your shirt."  
"Your arms—" Eddie had seen them. The arms of the man who looked like the  
extravagant sort of gunslinger one would only see in a spaghetti western were  
glowing with lines of bright, baleful red. Eddie knew well enough what lines  
like that meant. They meant blood-poisoning. They meant the devil was doing more  
than breathing up your ass; he was already crawling up the sewers that led to  
your pumps.  
"Never mind my fucking arms!" the pallid apparition told him. "Take off your

shirt and get rid of it!"

He heard waves; he heard the lonely hoot of a wind that knew no obstruction; he saw this mad dying man and nothing else but desolation; yet from behind him he heard the mur-muring voices of deplaning passengers and a steady muffled pounding.

"Mr. Dean!" That voice, he thought, is in another world. Not really doubting it; just trying to pound it through his head the way you'd pound a nail through a thick piece of mahogany. "You'll really have to—"

"You can leave it, pick it up later," the gunslinger croaked. "Gods, don't you understand I have to talk here? It hurts! And there is no time, you idiot!"

There were men Eddie would have killed for using such a word . . . but he had an idea that he might have a job killing this man, even though the man looked like killing might do him good.

Yet he sensed the truth in those blue eyes; all questions were canceled in their mad glare.

Eddie began to unbutton his shirt. His first impulse was to simply tear it off, like Clark Kent while Lois Lane was tied to a railroad track or something, but that was no good in real life; sooner or later you had to explain those missing buttons. So he slipped them through the loops while the pounding behind him went on.

He yanked the shirt out of his jeans, pulled it off, and dropped it, revealing the strapping tape across his chest. He looked like a man in the last stages of recovery from badly fractured ribs.

He snapped a glance behind him and saw an open door . . . its bottom jamb had dragged a fan shape in the gray grit of the beach when someone—the dying man, presumably—had opened it. Through the doorway he saw the first-class head, the basin, the mirror. . . and in it his own desperate face, black hair spilled across his brow and over his hazel eyes. In the background he saw the gunslinger, the beach, and soaring seabirds that screeched and squabbled over God knew what.

He pawed at the tape, wondering how to start, how to find a loose end, and a dazed sort of hopelessness settled over him. This was the way a deer or a rabbit must feel when it got halfway across a country road and turned its head only to be fixated by the oncoming glare of headlights.

It had taken William Wilson, the man whose name Poe had made famous, twenty minutes to strap him up. They would have the door to the first-class bathroom open in five, seven at most.

"I can't get this shit off," he told the swaying man in front of him. "I don't know who you are or where I am, but I'm telling you there's too much tape and too little time."

14

Deere, the co-pilot, suggested Captain McDonald ought to lay off pounding on the door when McDonald, in his frustration at 3A's lack of response, began to do so.

"Where's he going to go?" Deere asked. "What's he going to do? Flush himself down the John? He's too big."

"But if he's carrying—" McDonald began.

Deere, who had himself used cocaine on more than a few occasions, said: "If he's carrying, he's carrying heavy. He can't get rid of it."

"Turn off the water," McDonald snapped suddenly.

"Already have," the navigator (who had also tooted more than his flute on occasion) said. "But I don't think it matters. You can dissolve what goes into the holding tanks but you can't make it not there." They were clustered around the bathroom door, with its OCCUPIED sign glowing jeerily, all of them speaking in low tones. "The DEA guys drain it, draw off a sample, and the guy's hung." "He could always say someone came in before him and dumped it," McDonald replied. His voice was gaining a raw edge. He didn't want to be talking about this; he wanted to be doing something about it, even though he was acutely aware that the geese were still filing out, many looking with more than ordinary curiosity at the flight-deck crew and steward-esses gathered around the bathroom door. For their part, the crew were acutely aware that an act that was—well, overly overt—could provoke the terrorist boogeyman that now lurked in the back of every air-traveler's mind. McDonald knew his navigator and flight engineer were right, he knew that the stuff was apt to be in plastic bags with the scuzzball's prints on them, and yet he felt alarm bells going off in his mind. Something was not right about this. Something inside of him kept screaming Fast one! Fast one! as if the fellow from 3A were a riverboat gambler with palmed aces he was all ready to play.

"He's not trying to flush the John," Susy Douglas said. "He's not even trying to run the basin faucets. We'd hear them sucking air if he was. I hear something, but—"

"Leave," McDonald said curtly. His eyes flicked to Jane Doming. "You too. We'll take care of this."

Jane turned to go, cheeks burning.

Susy said quietly: "Jane bird-dogged him and I spotted the bulges under his shirt. I think we'll stay, Captain McDon-ald. If you want to bring charges of insubordination, you can. But I want you to remember that you may be raping the hell out of what could be a really big DEA bust."

Their eyes locked, flint sparking off steel.

Susy said, "I've flown with you seventy, eighty times, Mac. I'm trying to be your friend."

McDonald looked at her a moment longer, then nodded. "Stay, then. But I want both of you back a step toward the cockpit."

He stood on his toes, looked back, and saw the end of the line now just emerging from tourist class into business. Two minutes, maybe three.

He turned to the gate agent at the mouth of the hatch, who was watching them closely. He must have sensed some sort of problem, because he had unholstered his walkie-talkie and was holding it in his hand.

"Tell him I want customs agents up here," McDonald said quietly to the navigator. "Three or four. Armed. Now."

The navigator made his way through the line of pas-sengers, excusing himself with an easy grin, and spoke quietly to the gate agent, who raised his walkie-talkie to his mouth and spoke quietly into it.

McDonald—who had never put anything stronger than aspirin into his system in his entire life and that only rarely—turned to Deere. His lips were pressed into a thin white line like a scar.

"As soon as the last of the passengers are off, we're break-ing that shithouse door open," he said. "I don't care if Cus-toms is here or not. Do you understand?"



"Roger," Deere said, and watched the tail of the line make its way into first class.

15

"Get my knife," the gunslinger said. "It's in my purse."

He gestured toward a cracked leather bag lying on the sand. It looked more like a big packsack than a purse, the kind of thing you expected to see hippies carrying as they made their way along the Appalachian Trail, getting high on nature (and maybe a bomber joint every now and then), except this looked like the real thing, not just a prop for some airhead's self-image; something that had done years and years of hard— maybe desperate—travelling.

Gestured, but did not point. Couldn't point. Eddie realized why the man had a swatch of dirty shirting wrapped around his right hand: some of his fingers were gone.

"Get it," he said. "Cut through the tape. Try not to cut yourself. It's easy to do. You'll have to be careful, but you'll have to move fast just the same. There isn't much time."

"I know that," Eddie said, and knelt on the sand. None of this was real. That was it, that was the answer. As Henry Dean, the great sage and eminent junkie would have put it, Flip-flop, hippety-hop, offa your rocker and over the top, life's a fiction and the world's a lie, so put on some Creedence and let's get high.

None of it was real, it was all just an extraordinarily vivid nodder, so the best thing was just to ride low and go with the flow.

It sure was a vivid nodder. He was reaching for the zipper—or maybe it would be a velcro strip—on the man's "purse" when he saw it was held together by a crisscross pattern of rawhide thongs, some of which had broken and been carefully reknotted—reknotted small enough so they would still slide through the grommetted eyelets.

Eddie pulled the drag-knot at the top, spread the bag's opening, and found the knife beneath a slightly damp package that was the piece of shirting tied around the bullets. Just the handle was enough to take his breath away ... it was the true mellow gray-white of pure silver, engraved with a complex series of patterns that caught the eye, drew it—

Pain exploded in his ear, roared across his head, and momentarily puffed a red cloud across his vision. He fell clumsily over the open purse, struck the sand, and looked up at the pale man in the cut-down boots. This was no nodder. The blue eyes blazing from that dying face were the eyes of all truth.

"Admire it later, prisoner," the gunslinger said. "For now just use it."

He could feel his ear throbbing, swelling.

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Cut the tape," the gunslinger said grimly. "If they break into yon privy while you're still over here, I've got a feeling you're going to be here for a very long time. And with a corpse for company before long."

Eddie pulled the knife out of the scabbard. Not old; more than old, more than ancient. The blade, honed almost to the point of invisibility, seemed to be all age caught in metal.

"Yeah, it looks sharp," he said, and his voice wasn't steady.

The last passengers were filing out into the jetway. One of them, a lady of some seventy summers with that exquisite look of confusion which only first-time fliers with too many years or too little English seem capable of wearing, stopped to show Jane Doming her tickets. "How will I ever find my plane to Montreal?" she asked. "And what about my bags? Do they do my Customs here or there?"

"There will be a gate agent at the top of the jetway who can give you all the information you need, ma'am," Jane said.

"Well, I don't see why you can't give me all the information I need," the old woman said. "That jetway thing is still full of people."

"Move on, please, madam," Captain McDonald said. "We have a problem."

"Well, pardon me for living," the old woman said huffily, "I guess I just fell off the hearse!"

And strode past them, nose tilted like the nose of a dog scenting a fire still some distance away, tote-bag clutched in one hand, ticket-folder (with so many boarding-pass stubs sticking out of it that one might have been tempted to believe the lady had come most of the way around the globe, changing planes at every stop along the way) in the other.

"There's a lady who may never fly Delta's big jets again," Susy murmured.

"I don't give a fuck if she flies stuffed down the front of Superman's Jockies," McDonald said. "She the last?"

Jane darted past them, glanced at the seats in business class, then poked her head into the main cabin. It was deserted.

She came back and reported the plane empty.

McDonald turned to the jetway and saw two uniformed Customs agents fighting their way through the crowd, excusing themselves but not bothering to look back at the people they jostled aside. The last of these was the old lady, who dropped her ticket-folder. Papers flew and fluttered everywhere and she shrilled after them like an angry crow.

"Okay," McDonald said, "you guys stop right there."

"Sir, we're Federal Customs officers—"

"That's right, and I requested you, and I'm glad you came so fast. Now you just stand right there because this is my plane and that guy in there is one of my geese. Once he's off the plane and into the jetway, he's your goose and you can cook him any way you want." He nodded to Deere. "I'm going to give the son of a bitch one more chance and then we're going to break the door in."

"Okay by me," Deere said.

McDonald whacked on the bathroom door with the heel of his hand and yelled, "Come on out, my friend! I'm done asking!"

There was no answer.

"Okay," McDonald said. "Let's do it."

Dimly, Eddie heard an old woman say: "Well, pardon me for living! I guess I just fell off the hearse!"

He had parted half the strapping tape. When the old woman spoke his hand jerked a little and he saw a trickle of blood run down his belly.

"Shit," Eddie said.

"It can't be helped now," the gunslinger said in his hoarse voice. "Finish the job. Or does the sight of blood make you sick?"

"Only when it's my own," Eddie said. The tape had started just above his belly. The higher he cut the harder it got to see. He got another three inches or so, and almost cut himself again when he heard McDonald speaking to the Customs agents: "Okay, you guys stop right there."

"I can finish and maybe cut myself wide open or you can try," Eddie said. "I can't see what I'm doing. My fucking chin's in the way."

The gunslinger took the knife in his left hand. The hand was shaking. Watching that blade, honed to a suicidal sharpness, shaking like that made Eddie extremely nervous.

"Maybe I better chance it myself—"

"Wait."

The gunslinger stared fixedly at his left hand. Eddie didn't exactly disbelieve in telepathy, but he had never exactly believed in it, either. Nevertheless, he felt something now, something as real and palpable as heat baking out of an oven. After a few seconds he realized what it was: the gathering of this strange man's will.

How the hell can he be dying if I can feel the force of him that strongly?

The shaking hand began to steady down. Soon it was barely shivering. After no more than ten seconds it was as solid as a rock.

"Now," the gunslinger said. He took a step forward, raised the knife, and Eddie felt something else baking off him—rancid fever.

"Are you left-handed?" Eddie asked.

"No," the gunslinger said.

"Oh Jesus," Eddie said, and decided he might feel better if he closed his eyes for a moment. He heard the harsh whisper of the masking tape parting.

"There," the gunslinger said, stepping back. "Now pull it off as far as you can. I'll get the back."

No polite little knocks on the bathroom door now; this was a hammering fist. The passengers are out, Eddie thought. No more Mr. Nice Guy. Oh shit.

"Come on out, my friend! I'm done asking!"

"Yank it!" the gunslinger growled.

Eddie grabbed a thick tab of strapping tape in each hand and yanked as hard as he could. It hurt, hurt like hell. Stop bellyaching, he thought. Things could be worse. You could be hairy-chested, like Henry.

He looked down and saw a red band of irritated skin about seven inches wide across his sternum. Just above the solar plexus was the place where he had poked himself. Blood welled in a dimple and ran down to his navel in a scarlet runnel.

Beneath his armpits, the bags of dope now dangled like badly tied saddlebags.

"Okay," the muffled voice beyond the bathroom door said to someone else. "Let's do—"

Eddie lost the rest of it in the unexpected riptide of pain across his back as the gunslinger unceremoniously tore the rest of the girdle from him.

He bit down against a scream.

"Put your shirt on," the gunslinger said. His face, which Eddie had thought as pallid as the face of a living man could become, was now the color of ancient ashes. He held the girdle of tape (now sticking to itself in a meaningless tangle, the big bags of white stuff looking like strange cocoons) in his left

hand, then tossed it aside. Eddie saw fresh blood seeping through the makeshift bandage on the gunslinger's right hand. "Do it fast."

There was a thudding sound. This wasn't someone pounding for admittance. Eddie looked up in time to see the bathroom door shudder, to see the lights in there flicker. They were trying to break it in.

He picked his shirt up with fingers that suddenly seemed too large, too clumsy. The left sleeve was turned inside out. He tried to stuff it back through the hole, got his hand stuck for a moment, then yanked it out so hard he pulled the sleeve back again with it.

Thud, and the bathroom door shivered again.

"Gods, how can you be so clumsy?" the gunslinger moaned, and rammed his own fist into the left sleeve of Eddie's shirt. Eddie grabbed the cuff as the gunslinger pulled back. Now the gunslinger held the shirt for him as a butler might hold a coat for his master. Eddie put it on and groped for the lowest button.

"Not yet!" the gunslinger barked, and tore another piece away from his own diminishing shirt. "Wipe your gut!"

Eddie did the best he could. The dimple where the knife had actually pierced his skin was still welling blood. The blade was sharp, all right. Sharp enough.

He dropped the bloody wad of the gunslinger's shirt on the sand and buttoned his shirt.

Thud. This time the door did more than shudder; it buckled in its frame. Looking through the doorway on the beach, Eddie saw the bottle of liquid soap fall from where it had been standing beside the basin. It landed on his zipper bag.

He had meant to stuff his shirt, which was now buttoned (and buttoned straight, for a wonder), into his pants. Suddenly a better idea struck him. He unbuckled his belt instead.

"There's no time for that!" The gunslinger realized he was trying to scream and was unable. "That door's only got one hit left in it!"

"I know what I'm doing," Eddie said, hoping he did, and stepped back through the doorway between the worlds, unsnapping his jeans and raking the zipper down as he went.

After one desperate, despairing moment, the gunslinger followed him; physical and full of hot physical ache at one moment, nothing but cool ka in Eddie's head at the next.

18

"One more," McDonald said grimly, and Deere nodded. Now that all the passengers were out of the jetway as well as the plane itself, the Customs agents had drawn their weapons.

"Now!"

The two men drove forward and hit the door together. It flew open, a chunk of it hanging for a moment from the lock and then dropping to the floor.

And there sat Mr. 3A, with his pants around his knees and the tails of his faded paisley shirt concealing—barely—his jackhandle. Well, it sure does look like we caught him in the act, Captain McDonald thought wearily. Only trouble is, the act we caught him in wasn't against the law, last I heard. Suddenly he could feel the throb in his shoulder where he had hit the door—what? three times? four?

Out loud he barked, "What in hell's name are you doing in there, mister?"

"Well, I was taking a crap, " 3A said, "but if all you guys got a bad problem, I guess I could wipe myself in the terminal—"

"And I suppose you didn't hear us, smart guy?"

"Couldn't reach the door." 3A put out his hand to demonstrate, and although the door was now hanging askew against the wall to his left, McDonald could see his point. "I suppose I could have gotten up, but I, like, had a desperate situation on my hands. Except it wasn't exactly on my hands, if you get my drift. Nor did I want it on my hands, if you catch my further drift." 3A smiled a winning, slightly daffy smile which looked to Captain McDonald approximately as real as a nine-dollar bill. Listening to him, you'd think no one had ever taught him the simple trick of leaning forward.

"Get up," McDonald said.

"Be happy to. If you could just move the ladies back a little?" 3A smiled charmingly. "I know it's outdated in this day and age, but I can't help it. I'm modest. Fact is, I've got a lot to be modest about." He held up his left hand, thumb and forefinger roughly half an inch apart, and winked at Jane Doming, who blushed bright red and immediately disappeared up the jetway, closely followed by Susy.

You don't look modest, Captain McDonald thought. You look like a cat that just got the cream, that's what you look like.

When the stews were out of sight, 3A stood and pulled up his shorts and jeans. He then reached for the flush button and Captain McDonald promptly knocked his hand away, grabbed his shoulders, and pivoted him toward the aisle. Deere hooked a restraining hand into the back of his pants.

"Don't get personal," Eddie said. His voice was light and just right—he thought so, anyway—but inside everything was in free fall. He could feel that other, feel him clearly. He was inside his mind, watching him closely, standing steady, meaning to move in if Eddie fucked up. God, it all had to be a dream, didn't it? Didn't it?

"Stand still," Deere said.

Captain McDonald peered into the toilet.

"No shit," he said, and when the navigator let out a bray of involuntary laughter, McDonald glared at him.

"Well, you know how it is," Eddie said. "Sometimes you get lucky and it's just a false alarm. I let off a couple of real rippers, though. I mean, we're talking swamp gas. If you'd lit a match in here three minutes ago, you could have roasted a Thanksgiving turkey, you know? It must have been something I ate before I got on the plane, I g—"

"Get rid of him," McDonald said, and Deere, still holding Eddie by the back of the pants, propelled him out of the plane and into the jetway, where each Customs officer took one arm.

"Hey!" Eddie cried. "I want my bag! And I want my jacket!"

"Oh, we want you to have all your stuff," one of the officers said. His breath, heavy with the smell of Maalox and stomach acid, puffed against Eddie's face.

"We're very inter-ested in your stuff. Now let's go, little buddy."

Eddie kept telling them to take it easy, mellow out, he could walk just fine, but he thought later the tips of his shoes only touched the floor of the jetway three or four times between the 727's hatch and the exit to the terminal, where three more Customs officers and half a dozen airport security cops stood, the Customs guys waiting for Eddie, the cops holding back a small crowd that stared

at him with uneasy, avid interest as he was led away.

## CHAPTER 4 THE TOWER

1

Eddie Dean was sitting in a chair. The chair was in a small white room. It was the only chair in the small white room. The small white room was crowded. The small white room was smoky. Eddie was in his underpants. Eddie wanted a cigarette. The other six—no, seven—men in the small white room were dressed. The other men were standing around him, enclosing him. Three—no, four—of them were smoking cigarettes.

Eddie wanted to jitter and jive. Eddie wanted to hop and bop.

Eddie sat still, relaxed, looking at the men around him with amused interest, as if he wasn't going crazy for a fix, as if he wasn't going crazy from simple claustrophobia.

The other in his mind was the reason why. He had been terrified of the other at first. Now he thanked God the other was there.

The other might be sick, dying even, but there was enough steel left in his spine for him to have some left to loan this scared twenty-one-year-old junkie.

"That is a very interesting red mark on your chest," one of the Customs men said. A cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth. There was a pack in his shirt pocket. Eddie felt as if he could take about five of the cigarettes in that pack, line his mouth with them from corner to corner, light them all, inhale deeply, and be easier in his mind. "It looks like a stripe. It looks like you had something taped there, Eddie, and all at once decided it would be a good idea to rip it off and get rid of it."

"I picked up an allergy in the Bahamas," Eddie said. "I told you that. I mean, we've been through all of this several times. I'm trying to keep my sense of humor, but it's getting harder all the time."

"Fuck your sense of humor," another said savagely, and Eddie recognized that tone. It was the way he himself sounded when he'd spent half a night in the cold waiting for the man and the man didn't come. Because these guys were junkies, too. The only difference was guys like him and Henry were their junk.

"What about that hole in your gut? Where'd that come from, Eddie? Publishers' Clearing House?" A third agent was pointing at the spot where Eddie had poked himself. It had finally stopped dribbling but there was still a dark purple bubble there which looked more than ready to break open at the slightest urging. Eddie indicated the red band where the tape had been. "It itches," he said. This was no lie. "I fell asleep on the plane— check the stew if you don't believe me—"

"Why wouldn't we believe you, Eddie?"

"I don't know," Eddie said. "Do you usually get big drug smugglers who snooze on their way in?" He paused, gave them a second to think about it, then held out his hands. Some of the nails were ragged. Others were jagged. When you went cool turkey, he had discovered, your nails suddenly became your favorite munchies.

"I've been pretty good about not scratching, but I must have dug myself a damned good one while I was sleeping."

"Or while you were on the nod. That could be a needle-mark." Eddie could see they both knew better. You shot your-self up that close to the solar plexus, which was the nervous system's switchboard, you weren't ever going to shoot yourself up again.

"Give me a break," Eddie said. "You were in my face so close to look at my pupils I thought you were going to soul-kiss me. You know I wasn't on the nod." The third Customs agent looked disgusted. "For an inno-cent lambikins, you know an awful lot about dope, Eddie."

"What I didn't pick up on Miami Vice I got from The Readers' Digest. Now tell me the truth—how many times are we going to go through this?"

A fourth agent held up a small plastic Baggie. In it were several fibers.

"These are filaments. We'll get lab confirmation, but we know what sort they are. They're filaments of strapping tape."

"I didn't take a shower before I left the hotel," Eddie said for the fourth time. "I was out by the pool, getting some sun. Trying to get rid of the rash. The allergy rash. I fell asleep. I was damned lucky to make the plane at all. I had to run like hell. The wind was blowing. I don't know what stuck to my skin and what didn't."

Another reached out and ran a finger up the three inches of flesh from the inner bend of Eddie's left elbow.

"And these aren't needle tracks."

Eddie shoved the hand away. "Mosquito bites. I told you. Almost healed. Jesus Christ, you can see that for yourself!"

They could. This deal hadn't come up overnight. Eddie had stopped arm-popping a month ago. Henry couldn't have done that, and that was one of the reasons it had been Eddie, had to be Eddie. When he absolutely had to fix, he had taken it very high on his upper left thigh, where his left testicle lay against the skin of the leg... as he had the other night, when the sallow thing had finally brought him some stuff that was okay. Mostly he had just snorted, something with which Henry could no longer content himself. This caused feelings Eddie couldn't exactly define ... a mixture of pride and shame. If they looked there, if they pushed his testicles aside, he could have some serious problems. A blood-test could cause him problems even more serious, but that was one step further than they could go without some sort of evidence—and evi-dence was something they just didn't have. They knew every-thing but could prove nothing. All the difference between world and want, his dear old mother would have said.

"Mosquito bites."

"Yes."

"And the red mark's an allergic reaction."

"Yes. I had it when I went to the Bahamas; it just wasn't that bad."

"He had it when he went down there," one of the men said to another.

"Uh-huh," the second said. "You believe it?"

"Sure."

"You believe in Santa Claus?"

"Sure. When I was a kid I even had my picture taken with him once." He looked at Eddie. "You got a picture of this famous red mark from before you took your little trip, Eddie?"

Eddie didn't reply.

"If you're clean, why won't you take a blood-test?" This was the first guy again, the guy with the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. It had almost

burned down to the filter.

Eddie was suddenly angry—white-hot angry. He listened inside.

Okay, the voice responded at once, and Eddie felt more than agreement, he felt a kind of go-to-the-wall approval. It made him feel the way he felt when Henry hugged him, tousled his hair, punched him on the shoulder, and said You done good, kid—don't let it go to your head, but you done good.

"You know I'm clean." He stood up suddenly—so suddenly they moved back. He looked at the smoker who was closest to him. "And I'll tell you something, babe, if you don't get that coffin-nail out my face I'm going to knock it out."

The guy recoiled.

"You guys have emptied the crap-tank on that plane already. God, you've had enough time to have been through it three times. You've been through my stuff. I bent over and let one of you stick the world's longest finger up my ass. If a prostate check is an exam, that was a motherfucking safari. I was scared to look down. I thought I'd see that guy's fingernail sticking out of my cock."

He glared around at them.

"You've been up my ass, you've been through my stuff, and I'm sitting here in a pair of Jockies with you guys blowing smoke in my faces. You want a blood-test? Kay. Bring in someone to do it."

They murmured, looked at each other. Surprised. Uneasy.

"But if you want to do it without a court order," Eddie said, "whoever does it better bring a lot of extra hypos and vials, because I'll be damned if I'm gonna piss alone. I want a Federal marshal in here, and I want each one of you to take the same goddam test, and I want your names and IDs on each vial, and I want them to go into that Federal marshal's custody. And whatever you test mine for—cocaine, heroin, bennies, pot, whatever—I want those same tests performed on the samples from you guys. And then I want the results turned over to my lawyer."

"Oh boy, YOUR LAWYER," one of them cried. "That's what it always comes down to with you shitbags, doesn't it, Eddie? You'll hear from MY LAWYER. I'll sic MY LAWYER on you. That crap makes me want to puke!"

"As a matter of fact I don't currently have one," Eddie said, and this was the truth. "I didn't think I needed one. You guys changed my mind. You got nothing because I have nothing, but the rock and roll just doesn't stop, does it? So you want me to dance? Great. I'll dance. But I'm not gonna do it alone. You guys'll have to dance, too."

There was a thick, difficult silence.

"I'd like you to take down your shorts again, please, Mr. Dean," one of them said. This guy was older. This guy looked like he was in charge of things. Eddie thought that maybe—just maybe—this guy had finally realized where the fresh tracks might be. Until now they hadn't checked. His arms, his shoulders, his legs . . . but not there. They had been too sure they had a bust.

"I'm through taking things off, taking things down, and eating this shit," Eddie said. "You get someone in here and we'll do a bunch of blood-tests or I'm getting out. Now which do you want?"

That silence again. And when they started looking at each other, Eddie knew he had won.

WE won, he amended. What's your name, fella?

Roland. Yours is Eddie. Eddie Dean.

You listen good.



Listen and watch.

"Give him his clothes," the older man said disgustedly. He looked at Eddie. "I don't know what you had or how you got rid of it, but I want you to know that we're going to find out."

The old dude surveyed him.

"So there you sit. There you sit, almost grinning. What you say doesn't make me want to puke. What you are does."

"I make you want to puke."

"That's affirmative."

"Oh boy," Eddie said. "I love it. I'm sitting here in a little room and I've got nothing on but my underwear and there's seven guys around me with guns on their hips and/ make you want to puke? Man, you have got a problem."

Eddie took a step toward him. The Customs guy held his ground for a moment, and then something in Eddie's eyes—a crazy color that seemed half-hazel, half-blue—made him step back against his will.

"I'M NOT CARRYING!" Eddie roared. "QUIT NOW! JUST QUIT! LET ME ALONE!"

The silence again. Then the older man turned around and yelled at someone,

"Didn't you hear me? Get his clothes!"

And that was that.

2

"You think we're being tailed?" the cabbie asked. He sounded amused.

Eddie turned forward. "Why do you say that?" "You keep looking out the back window." "I never thought about being tailed," Eddie said. This was the absolute truth. He had seen the tails the first time he looked around. Tails, not tail. He didn't have to keep looking around to confirm their presence. Out-patients from a sanita-ri-um for the mentally retarded would have trouble losing Eddie's cab on this late May afternoon; traffic on the L.I.E. was sparse. "I'm a student of traffic patterns, that's all."

"Oh," the cabbie said. In some circles such an odd state-ment would have prompted questions, but New York cab drivers rarely question; instead they assert, usually in a grand manner. Most of these assertions begin with the phrase This city! as if the words were a religious invocation preceding a sermon . . . which they usually were. Instead, this one said: "Because if you did think we were being tailed, we're not. I'd know. This city! Jesus! I've tailed plenty of people in my time. You'd be surprised how many people jump into my cab and say 'Follow that car.' I know, sounds like something you only hear in the movies, right? Right. But like they say, art imitates life and life imitates art. It really happens! And as for shaking a tail, it's easy if you know how to set the guy up. You ..."

Eddie tuned the cabbie down to a background drone, listening just enough so he could nod in the right places. When you thought about it, the cabbie's rap was actually quite amusing. One of the tails was a dark blue sedan. Eddie guessed that one belonged to Customs. The other was a panel truck with GINELLI'S PIZZA written on the sides. There was also a picture of a pizza, only the pizza was a smiling boy's face, and the smiling boy was smacking his lips, and written under the picture was the slogan "UMMMMM! It's-a GOOOD Pizza!" Only some young urban artist with a spray-can and a rudi-mentary sense of humor had drawn a line through Pizza and had printed PUSSY above it.

Ginelli. There was only one Ginelli Eddie knew; he ran a restaurant called Four Fathers. The pizza business was a side-line, a guaranteed stiff, an accountant's angel. Ginelli and Balazar. They went together like hot dogs and mustard. According to the original plan, there was to have been a limo waiting outside the terminal with a driver ready to whisk him away to Balazar's place of business, which was a midtown saloon. But of course the original plan hadn't included two hours in a little white room, two hours of steady questioning from one bunch of Customs agents while another bunch first drained and then raked the contents of Flight 901's waste-tanks, looking for the big carry they also suspected, the big carry that would be unflushable, undissolvable.

When he came out, there was no limo, of course. The driver would have had his instructions: if the mule isn't out of the terminal fifteen minutes or so after the rest of the passengers have come out, drive away fast. The limo driver would know better than to use the car's telephone, which was actually a radio that could easily be monitored. Balazar would call people, find out Eddie had struck trouble, and get ready for trouble of his own. Balazar might have recognized Eddie's steel, but that didn't change the fact that Eddie was a junkie. A junkie could not be relied upon to be a stand-up guy.

This meant there was a possibility that the pizza truck just might pull up in the lane next to the taxi, someone just might stick an automatic weapon out of the pizza truck's window, and then the back of the cab would become something that looked like a bloody cheese-grater. Eddie would have been more worried about that if they had held him for four hours instead of two, and seriously worried if it had been six hours instead of four. But only two ... he thought Balazar would trust him to have hung on to his lip at least that long. He would want to know about his goods.

The real reason Eddie kept looking back was the door.

It fascinated him.

As the Customs agents had half-carried, half-dragged him down the stairs to Kennedy's administration section, he had looked back over his shoulder and there it had been, improbable but indubitably, inarguably real, floating along at a distance of about three feet. He could see the waves rolling steadily in, crashing on the sand; he saw that the day over there was beginning to darken. The door was like one of those trick pictures with a hidden image in them, it seemed; you couldn't see that hidden part for the life of you at first, but once you had, you couldn't unsee it, no matter how hard you tried.

It had disappeared on the two occasions when the gunslinger went back without him, and that had been scary— Eddie had felt like a child whose nightlight has burned out. The first time had been during the customs interrogation.

I have to go, Roland's voice had cut cleanly through whatever question they were currently throwing at him. I'll only be a few moments. Don't be afraid.

Why? Eddie asked. Why do you have to go?

"What's wrong?" one of the Customs guys had asked him. "All of a sudden you look scared."

All of a sudden he had felt scared, but of nothing this yo-yo would understand. He looked over his shoulder, and the Customs men had also turned. They saw nothing but a blank white wall covered with white panels drilled with holes to damp sound; Eddie saw the door, its usual three feet away (now it was embedded in the room's wall, an escape hatch none of his interrogators could see). He saw more. He saw things coming out of the waves, things that looked like refugees

from a horror movie where the effects are just a little more special than you want them to be, special enough so everything looks real. They looked like a hideous cross-breeding of prawn, lobster, and spider. They were making some weird sound.

"You getting the jim-jams?" one of the Customs guys had asked. "Seeing a few bugs crawling down the wall, Eddie?"

That was so close to the truth that Eddie had almost laughed. He understood why the man named Roland had to go back, though; Roland's mind was safe enough—at least for the time being—but the creatures were moving toward his body, and Eddie had a suspicion that if Roland did not soon vacate it from the area it currently occupied, there might not be any body left to go back to.

Suddenly in his head he heard David Lee Roth bawling: Oh lyyyyy . . . ain't got no body . . . and this time he did laugh. He couldn't help it.

"What's so funny?" the Customs agent who had wanted to know if he was seeing bugs asked him.

"This whole situation," Eddie had responded. "Only in the sense of peculiar, not hilarious. I mean, if it was a movie it would be more like Fellini than Woody Allen, if you get what I mean."

You'll be all right? Roland asked.

Yeah, fine. TCB, man.

I don't understand.

Go take care of business.

Oh. All right. I'll not be long.

And suddenly that other had been gone. Simply gone. Like a wisp of smoke so thin that the slightest vagary of wind could blow it away. Eddie looked around again, saw nothing but drilled white panels, no door, no ocean, no weird mon-strosities, and he felt his gut begin to tighten. There was no question of believing it had all been a hallucination after all; the dope was gone, and that was all the proof Eddie needed. But Roland had ... helped, somehow. Made it easier.

"You want me to hang a picture there?" one of the Cus-toms guys asked.

"No," Eddie said, and blew out a sigh. "I want you to let me out of here."

"Soon as you tell us what you did with the skag," another said, "or was it coke?" And so it started again: round and round she goes and where she stops nobody knows.

Ten minutes later—ten very long minutes—Roland was suddenly back in his mind.

One second gone, next second there. Eddie sensed he was deeply exhausted.

Taken care of? he asked.

Yes. I'm sorry it took so long. A pause. I had to crawl.

Eddie looked around again. The doorway had returned, but now it offered a slightly different view of that world, and he realized that, as it moved with him here, it moved with Roland there. The thought made him shiver a little. It was like being tied to this other by some weird umbilicus. The gunslinger's body lay collapsed in front of it as before, but now he was looking down a long stretch of beach to the braided high-tide line where the monsters wandered about, growling and buzzing. Each time a wave broke all of them raised their claws. They looked like the audiences in those old documen-tary films where Hitler's speaking and everyone is throwing that old seig heil! salute like their lives depended on it—which ; they probably did, when you thought about it. Eddie could see the tortured markings of the gunslinger's progress in the sand.

As Eddie watched, one of the horrors reached up, light-ning quick, and snared a sea-bird which happened to swoop ; too close to the beach. The thing fell to the sand in two bloody, spraying chunks. The parts were covered by the shelled horrors even before they had stopped twitching. A single white feather drifted up. A claw snatched it down.

Holy Christ, Eddie thought numbly. Look at those snappers.

"Why do you keep looking back there?" the guy in charge had asked.

"From time to time I need an antidote," Eddie said.

"From what?"

"Your face."

3

The cab driver dropped Eddie at the building in Co-Op City, thanked him for the dollar tip, and drove off. Eddie just stood for a moment, zipper bag in one hand, his jacket hooked over a finger of the other and slung back over his shoulder. Here he shared a two-bedroom apartment with his brother. He stood for a moment looking up at it, a monolith with all the style and taste of a brick Saltines box. The many windows made it look like a prison cellblock to Eddie, and he found the view as depressing as Roland—the other—did amazing. Never, even as a child, did I see a building so high, Roland said. And there are so many of them!

Yeah, Eddie agreed. We live like a bunch of ants in a hill. It may look good to you, but I'll tell you, Roland, it gets old. It gets old in a hurry.

The blue car cruised by; the pizza truck turned in and approached. Eddie stiffened and felt Roland stiffen inside him. Maybe they intended to blow him away after all.

The door? Roland asked. Shall we go through? Do you wish it? Eddie sensed Roland was ready—for anything—but the voice was calm.

Not yet, Eddie said. Could be they only want to talk. But be ready.

He sensed that was an unnecessary thing to say; he sensed that Roland was readier to move and act in his deepest sleep than Eddie would ever be in his most wide-awake moment.

The pizza truck with the smiling kid on the side closed in. The passenger window rolled down and Eddie waited outside the entrance to his building with his shadow trailing out long in front of him from the toes of his sneakers, waiting to see which it would be—a face or a gun.

4

The second time Roland left him had been no more than five minutes after the Customs people had finally given up and let Eddie go.

The gunslinger had eaten, but not enough; he needed to drink; most of all he needed medicine. Eddie couldn't yet help him with the medicine Roland really needed (although he suspected the gunslinger was right and Balazar could ... if Balazar wanted to), but simple aspirin might at least knock down the fever that Eddie had felt when the gunslinger stepped close to sever the top part of the tape girdle. He paused in front of the newsstand in the main terminal.

Do you have aspirin where you come from?

I have never heard of it. Is it magic or medicine?

Both, I guess.

Eddie went into the newsstand and bought a tin of Extra-Strength Anacin. He went over to the snack bar and bought a couple of foot-long dogs and an extra-large Pepsi. He was putting mustard and catsup on the franks (Henry called the foot-longs Godzilla-dogs) when he suddenly remembered this stuff wasn't for him.

For all he knew, Roland might not like mustard and catsup. For all he knew, Roland might be a veggie. For all he knew, this crap might kill Roland.

Well, too late now, Eddie thought. When Roland spoke— when Roland acted—Eddie knew all this was really happen-ing. When he was quiet, that giddy feeling that it must be a dream—an extraordinarily vivid dream he was having as he slept on Delta 901 inbound to Kennedy—insisted on creeping back.

Roland had told him he could carry the food into his own world. He had already done something similar once, he said, when Eddie was asleep. Eddie found it all but impossible to believe, but Roland assured him it was true.

Well, we still have to be damned careful, Eddie said. They've got two Customs guys watching me. Us. Whatever the hell I am now.

I know we have to be careful, Roland returned. There aren't two; there are five.

Eddie suddenly felt one of the weird-est sensations of his entire life. He did not move his eyes but felt them moved. Roland moved them.

A guy in a muscle shirt talking into a telephone.

A woman sitting on a bench, rooting through her purse.

A young black guy who would have been spectacularly handsome except for the harelip which surgery had only partially repaired, looking at the tee-shirts in the newsstand Eddie had come from not long since.

There was nothing wrong about any of them on top, but Eddie recognized them for what they were nonetheless and it was like seeing those hidden images in a child's puzzle, which, once seen, could never be unseen. He felt dull heat in his cheeks, because it had taken the other to point out what he should have seen at once. He had spotted only two. These three were a little better, but not that much; the eyes of the phone-man weren't blank, imagining the person he was talking to but aware, actually looking, and the place where Eddie was . . . that was the place to which the phone-man's eyes just happened to keep returning. The purse-woman didn't find what she wanted or give up but simply went on rooting endlessly. And the shopper had had a chance to look at every shirt on the spindle-rack at least a dozen times.

All of a sudden Eddie felt five again, afraid to cross the street without Henry to hold his hand.

Never mind, Roland said. And don't worry about the food, either. I've eaten bugs while they were still lively enough for some of them to go running down my throat.

Yeah, Eddie replied, but this is New York.

He took the dogs and the soda to the far end of the counter and stood with his back to the terminal's main concourse. Then he glanced up in the left-hand corner. A convex mirror bulged there like a hypertensive eye. He could see all of his followers in it, but none was close enough to see the food and cup of soda, and that was good, because Eddie didn't have the slightest idea what was going to happen to it.

Put the astin on the meat-things. Then hold everything in your hands.

Aspirin.

Good. Call It flutergork if you want, pr... Eddie. Just do it.

He took the Anacin out of the stapled bag he had stuffed in his pocket, almost put it down on one of the hot-dogs, and suddenly realized that Roland would have problems just get-ting what Eddie thought of as the poison-proofing—off the tin, let alone opening it.

He did it himself, shook three of the pills onto one of the napkins, debated, then added three more.

Three now, three later, he said. If there is a later.

All right. Thank you.

Now what?

Hold all of it.

Eddie had glanced into the convex mirror again. Two of the agents were strolling casually toward the snack bar, maybe not liking the way Eddie's back was turned, maybe smelling a little prestidigitation in progress and wanting a closer look.

If something was going to happen, it better happen quick.

He put his hands around everything, feeling the heat of the dogs in their soft white rolls, the chill of the Pepsi. In that moment he looked like a guy getting ready to carry a snack back to his kids . . . and then the stuff started to melt.

He stared down, eyes widening, widening, until it felt to him that they must soon fall out and dangle by their stalks.

He could see the hotdogs through the rolls. He could see the Pepsi through the cup, the ice-choked liquid curving to conform to a shape which could no longer be seen.

Then he could see the red Formica counter through the foot-long and the white wall through the Pepsi. His hands slid toward each other, the resistance between them growing less and less. . . and then they closed against each other, palm to palm. The food. . . the napkins . . . the Pepsi Cola. . . the six Anacin . . . all the things which had been between his hands were gone.

Jesus jumped up and played the fiddle, Eddie thought numbly. He flicked his eyes up toward the convex mirror.

The doorway was gone. . . just as Roland was gone from his mind.

Eat hearty, my friend, Eddie thought . . . but was this weird alien presence that called itself Roland his friend? That was far from proved, wasn't it? He had saved Eddie's bacon, true enough, but that didn't mean he was a Boy Scout.

All the same, he liked Roland. Feared him . . . but liked him as well.

Suspected that in time he could love him, as he loved Henry.

Eat well, stranger, he thought. Eat well, stay alive. . . and come back.

Close by were a few mustard-stained napkins left by a previous customer. Eddie balled them up, tossed them in the trash-barrel by the door on his way out, and chewed air as if finishing a last bite of something. He was even able to manu-facture a burp as he approached the black guy on his way toward the signs pointing the way to LUGGAGE and GROUND TRANSPORTATION.

"Couldn't find a shirt you liked?" Eddie asked.

"I beg your pardon?" the black guy turned from the American Airlines departures monitor he was pretending to study.

"I thought maybe you were looking for one that said PLEASE FEED ME, I AM A U.S. GOVERNMENT EM-PLOYEE," Eddie said, and walked on.

As he headed down the stairs he saw the purse-rooter hurriedly snap her purse shut and get to her feet.

Oh boy, this is gonna be like the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

It had been one fuck of an interesting day, and Eddie didn't think it was over yet.

5

When Roland saw the lobster-things coming out of the waves again (their coming had nothing to do with tide, then; it was the dark that brought them), he left Eddie Dean to move himself before the creatures could find and eat him.

The pain he had expected and was prepared for. He had lived with pain so long it was almost an old friend. He was appalled, however, by the rapidity with which his fever had increased and his strength decreased. If he had not been dying before, he most assuredly was now. Was there something powerful enough in the prisoner's world to keep that from happening? Perhaps. But if he didn't get some of it within the next six or eight hours, he thought it wouldn't matter. If things went much further, no medicine or magic in that world or any other that would make him well again.

Walking was impossible. He would have to crawl.

He was getting ready to start when his eye fixed upon the twisted band of sticky stuff and the bags of devil-powder. If he left the stuff here, the lobstrosities would almost surely tear the bags open. The sea-breeze would scatter the powder to the four winds. Which is where it belongs, the gunslinger thought grimly, but he couldn't allow it. When the time came, Eddie Dean would be in a long tub of trouble if he couldn't produce that powder. It was rarely possible to bluff men of the sort he guessed this Balazar to be. He would want to see what he had paid for, and until he saw it Eddie would have enough guns pointed at him to equip a small army.

The gunslinger pulled the twisted rope of glue-string over to him and slung it over his neck. Then he began to work his way up the beach.

He had crawled twenty yards—almost far enough to consider himself safe, he judged—when the horrible (yet cosmically funny) funny realization that he was leaving the doorway behind came to him. What in God's name was he going through this for?

He turned his head and saw the doorway, not down on the beach, but three feet behind him. For a moment Roland could only stare, and realize what he would have known already, if not for the fever and the sound of the Inquisitors, drumming their ceaseless questions at Eddie, Where did you, how did you, why did you, when did you (questions that seemed to merge eerily with the questions of the scabbling horrors that came crawling and wriggling out of the waves:

Dad-a-chock? Dad-a-chum? Did-a-chick?), as mere delirium. Not so.

Now I take it with me everywhere I go, he thought, just as he does. It comes with us everywhere now, following like a curse you can never get rid of.

All of this felt so true as to be unquestionable . . . and so did one other thing.

If the door between them should close, it would be closed forever.

When that happens, Roland thought grimly, he must be on this side. With me.

What a paragon of virtue you are, gunslinger! the man in black laughed. He seemed to have taken up permanent residence inside Roland's head. You have killed the boy; that was the sacrifice that enabled you to catch me and, I suppose, to create the door between worlds. Now you intend to draw your three, one by one, and condemn all of them to something you would not have for

yourself: a lifetime in an alien world, where they may die as easily as animals in a zoo set free in a wild place.

The Tower, Roland thought wildly. Once I've gotten to the Tower and done whatever it is I'm supposed to do there, accomplished whatever fundamental act of restoration or redemption for which I was meant, then perhaps they— But the shrieking laughter of the man in black, the man who was dead but lived on as the gunslinger's stained con-science, would not let him go on with the thought.

Neither, however, could the thought of the treachery he contemplated turn him aside from his course.

He managed another ten yards, looked back, and saw that even the largest of the crawling monsters would venture no further than twenty feet above the high-tide line. He had already managed three times that distance.

It's well, then.

Nothing is well, the man in black replied merrily, and you know it.

Shut up, the gunslinger thought, and for a wonder, the voice actually did.

Roland pushed the bags of devil-dust into the cleft between two rocks and covered them with handfuls of sparse saw-grass. With that done he rested briefly, head thumping like a hot bag of waters, skin alternately hot and cold, then rolled back through the doorway into that other world, that other body, leaving the increasing deadly infection behind for a little while.

6

The second time he returned to himself, he entered a body so deeply asleep that he thought for a moment it had entered a comatose state... a state of such lowered bodily function that in moments he would feel his own consciousness start down a long slide into darkness.

Instead, he forced his body toward wakefulness, punched and pummelled it out of the dark cave into which it had crawled. He made his heart speed up, made his nerves re-accept the pain that sizzled through his skin and woke his flesh to groaning reality.

It was night now. The stars were out. The popkin-things Eddie had bought him were small bits of warmth in the chill.

He didn't feel like eating them, but eat them he would. First, though . . .

He looked at the white pills in his hand. Astin, Eddie called it. No, that wasn't quite right, but Roland couldn't pronounce the word as the prisoner had said it. Medicine was what it came down to. Medicine from that other world.

If anything from your world is going to do for me, Pris-oner, Roland thought grimly, I think it's more apt to be your potions than your popkins.

Still, he would have to try it. Not the stuff he really needed—or so Eddie believed—but something which might reduce his fever.

Three now, three later. If there is a later.

He put three of the pills in his mouth, then pushed the cover—some strange white stuff that was neither paper nor glass but which seemed a bit like both—off the paper cup which held the drink, and washed them down.

The first swallow amazed him so completely that for a moment he only lay there, propped against a rock, his eyes so wide and still and full of reflected starlight that he would surely have been taken for dead already by anyone who hap-pened to pass by. Then he drank greedily, holding the cup in both hands, the



rotted, pulsing hurt in the stumps of his fingers barely noticed in his total absorption with the drink.

Sweet! Gods, such sweetness! Such sweetness! Such—

One of the small flat icecubes in the drink caught in his throat. He coughed, pounded his chest, and choked it out. Now there was a new pain in his head: the silvery pain that comes with drinking something too cold too fast.

He lay still, feeling his heart pumping like a runaway engine, feeling fresh energy surge into his body so fast he felt as if he might actually explode.

Without thinking of what he was doing, he tore another piece from his shirt—soon it would be no more than a rag hanging around his neck—and laid it across one leg. When the drink was gone he would pour the ice into the rag and make a pack for his wounded hand. But his mind was elsewhere.

Sweet! it cried out again and again, trying to get the sense of it, or to convince itself there was sense in it, much as Eddie had tried to convince himself of the other as an actual being and not some mental convulsion that was only another part of himself trying to trick him. Sweet! Sweet! Sweet!

The dark drink was laced with sugar, even more than Marten—who had been a great glutton behind his grave ascetic's exterior—had put in his coffee in mornings and at 'Downers.

Sugar . . . white . . . powder . . .

The gunslinger's eyes wandered to the bags, barely visible under the grass he had tossed over them, and wondered briefly if the stuff in this drink and the stuff in the bags might be one and the same. He knew that Eddie had understood him perfectly over here, where they were two separate physical creatures; he suspected that if he had crossed bodily to Eddie's world (and he understood instinctively it could be done . . . although if the door should shut while he was there, he would be there forever, as Eddie would be here forever if their positions were reversed), he would have understood the language just as perfectly. He knew from being in Eddie's mind that the languages of the two worlds were similar to begin with. Similar, but not the same. Here a sandwich was a popkin. There to rustle was finding something to eat. So... was it not possible that the drug Eddie called cocaine was, in the gunslinger's world, called sugar?

Reconsideration made it seem unlikely. Eddie had bought this drink openly, knowing that he was being watched by people who served the Priests of Customs. Further, Roland sensed he had paid comparatively little for it. Less, even, than for the popkins of meat. No, sugar was not cocaine, but Roland could not understand why anyone would want cocaine or any other illegal drug, for that matter, in a world where such a powerful one as sugar was so plentiful and cheap.

He looked at the meat popkins again, felt the first stir-rings of hunger . . .

and realized with amazement and confused thankfulness that he felt better.

The drink? Was that it? The sugar in the drink?

That might be part of it—but a small part. Sugar could revive one's strength for awhile when it was flagging; this was something he had known since he was a child. But sugar could not dull pain or damp the fever-fire in your body when some infection had turned it into a furnace. All the same, that was exactly what had happened to him . . . was still happening.

The convulsive shuddering had stopped. The sweat was drying on his brow. The fishhooks which had lined his throat seemed to be disappearing. Incredible as it

was, it was also an inarguable fact, not just imagination or wishful thinking (in point of fact, the gunslinger had not been capable of such frivolity as the latter in unknown and unknowable decades). His missing fingers and toes still throbbed and roared, but he believed even these pains to be muted.

Roland put his head back, closed his eyes and thanked God.

God and Eddie Dean.

Don't make the mistake of putting your heart near his hand, Roland, a voice from the deeper ranges of his mind spoke—this was not the nervous, tittery-bitchy voice of the man in black or the rough one of Cort; to the gunslinger it sounded like his father. You know that what he's done for you he has done out of his own personal need, just as you know that those men—Inquisitors though they may be—are partly or completely right about him. He is a weak vessel, and the reason they took him was neither false nor base. There is steel in him, I dispute it not. But there is weakness as well. He is like Hax, the cook. Hax poisoned reluctantly . . . but reluctance has never stilled the screams of the dying as their intestines rupture. And there is yet another reason to beware . . .

But Roland needed no voice to tell him what that other reason was. He had seen that in Jake's eyes when the boy finally began to understand his purpose.

Don't make the mistake of putting your heart near his hand.

Good advice. You did yourself ill to feel well of those to whom ill must eventually be done.

Remember your duty, Roland.

"I've never forgotten it," he husked as the stars shone pitilessly down and the waves grated on the shore and the lobster monstrosities cried their idiot questions. "I'm damned for my duty. And why should the damned turn aside?" He began to eat the meat popkins which Eddie called "dogs."

Roland didn't much care for the idea of eating dog, and these things tasted like gutter-leavings compared to the tooter-fish, but after that marvellous drink, did he have any right to complain? He thought not. Besides, it was late in the game to worry overmuch about such niceties.

He ate everything and then returned to the place where now Eddie was, in some magical vehicle that rushed along a metal road filled with other such vehicles . . . dozens, maybe hundreds, and not a horse pulling a single one.

7

Eddie stood ready as the pizza truck pulled up; Roland stood even more ready inside of him.

Just another version of Diana's Dream, Roland thought. What was in the box? The golden bowl or the biter-snake? And just as she turns the key and puts her hands upon the lid she hears her mother calling "Wake up, Diana! It's time to milk!"

Okay, Eddie thought. Which is it gonna be? The lady or the tiger?

A man with a pale, pimply face and big buck teeth looked out of the pizza truck's passenger window. It was a face Eddie knew.

"Hi, Col," Eddie said without much enthusiasm. Beyond Col Vincent, sitting behind the wheel, was Old Double-Ugly, which was what Henry called Jack Andolini.

But Henry never called him that to his face, Eddie thought. No, of course not. Calling Jack something like that to his face would be a wonderful way to get yourself killed. He was a huge man with a bulging caveman's forehead and a

prothagonous jaw to match. He was related to Enrico Balazar by marriage ... a niece, a cousin, some fucking thing. His gigantic hands clung to the wheel of the delivery truck like the hands of a monkey clinging to a branch. Coarse sprouts of hair grew from his ears. Eddie could only see one of those ears now because Jack Andolini remained in profile, never looking around.

Old Double-Ugly. But not even Henry (who, Eddie had to admit, was not always the most perceptive guy in the world) had ever made the mistake of calling him Old Double-Stupid. Colin Vincent was no more than a glorified gofer. Jack, how-ever, had enough smarts behind that Neanderthal brow to be Balazar's number one lieutenant. Eddie didn't like the fact that Balazar had sent a man of such importance. He didn't like it at all.

"Hi, Eddie," Col said. "Heard you had some trouble."

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Eddie said. He realized he was scratching first one arm then the other, one of the typical junkie moves he had tried so hard to keep away from while they had him in custody. He made himself stop. But Col was smiling, and Eddie felt an urge to slam a fist all the way through that smile and out the other side. He might have done it, too. . . except for Jack. Jack was still staring straight ahead, a man who seemed to be thinking his own rudimentary thoughts as he observed the world in the simple primary colors and elementary motions which were all a man of such intellect (or so you'd think, looking at him) could perceive. Yet Eddie thought Jack saw more in a single day than Col Vincent would in his whole life.

"Well, good," Col said. "That's good."

Silence. Col looked at Eddie, smiling, waiting for Eddie to start the Junkie Shuffle again, scratching, shifting from foot to foot like a kid who needs to go to the bathroom, waiting mostly for Eddie to ask what was up, and by the way, did they just happen to have any stuff on them?

Eddie only looked back at him, not scratching now, not moving at all.

A faint breeze blew a Ring-Ding wrapper across the park-ing lot. The scratchy sound of its skittering passage and the wheezy thump of the pizza truck's loose valves were the only sounds.

Col's knowing grin began to falter.

"Hop in, Eddie," Jack said without looking around. "Let's take a ride."

"Where?" Eddie asked, knowing.

"Balazar's." Jack didn't look around. He flexed his hands on the wheel once. A large ring, solid gold except for the onyx stone which bulged from it like the eye of a giant insect, glittered on the third finger of his right as he did it.

"He wants to know about his goods."

"I have his goods. They're safe."

"Fine. Then nobody has anything to worry about," Jack Andolini said, and did not look around.

"I think I want to go upstairs first," Eddie said. "I want to change my clothes, talk to Henry—"

"And get fixed up, don't forget that," Col said, and grinned his big yellow-toothed grin. "Except you got nothing to fix with, little chum."

Dad-a-chum? the gunslinger thought in Eddie's mind, and both of them shuddered a little.

Col observed the shudder and his smile widened. Oh, here it is after all, that smile said. The good old Junkie Shuffle. Had me worried there for a minute, Eddie. The teeth revealed by the smile's expansion were not an improvement on

those pre-viously seen.

"Why's that?"

"Mr. Balazar thought it would be better to make sure you guys had a clean place," Jack said without looking around. He went on observing the world an observer would have believed it impossible for such a man to observe. "In case anyone showed up."

"People with a Federal search warrant, for instance," Col said. His face hung and leered. Now Eddie could feel Roland also wanting to drive a fist through the rotted teeth that made that grin so reprehensible, so somehow irredeemable. The unanimity of feeling cheered him up a little. "He sent in a cleaning service to wash the walls and vacuum the carpets and he ain't going to charge you a red cent for it, Eddie!"

Now you'll ask what I've got, Col's grin said. Oh yeah, now you'll ask, Eddie my boy. Because you may not love the candy-man, but you do love the candy, don't you? And now that you know Balazar's made sure your own private stash is gone— A sudden thought, both ugly and frightening, flashed through his mind. If the stash was gone—

"Where's Henry?" he said suddenly, so harshly that Col drew back, surprised. Jack Andolini finally turned his head. He did so slowly, as if it was an act he performed only rarely, and at great personal cost. You almost expected to hear old oilless hinges creaking inside the thickness of his neck.

"Safe," he said, and then turned his head back to its original position again, just as slowly.

Eddie stood beside the pizza truck, fighting the panic trying to rise in his mind and drown coherent thought. Suddenly the need to fix, which he had been holding at bay pretty well, was overpowering. He had to fix. With a fix he could think, get himself under control—

Quit it! Roland roared inside his head, so loud Eddie winced (and Col, mistaking Eddie's grimace of pain and surprise for another little step in the Junkie Shuffle, began to grin again). Quit it! I'll be all the goddamned control you need!

You don't understand! He's my brother! He's my fucking brother! Balazar's got my brother!

You speak as if it was a word I'd never heard before. Do you fear for him?

Yes! Christ, yes!

Then do what they expect. Cry. Pule and beg. Ask for this fix of yours. I'm sure they expect you to, and I'm sure they have it. Do all those things, make them sure of you, and you can be sure all your fears will be justified.

I don't understand what you m—

I mean if you show a yellow gut, you will go far toward getting your precious brother killed. Is that what you want?

All right. I'll be cool. It may not sound that way, but I'll be cool.

Is that what you call it? All right, then. Yes. Be cool.

"This isn't the way the deal was supposed to go down," Eddie said, speaking past Col and directly at Jack Andolini's tufted ear. "This isn't why I took care of Balazar's goods and hung onto my lip while some other guy would have been puking out five names for every year off on the plea-bargain."

"Balazar thought your brother would be safer with him," Jack said, not looking around. "He took him into protective custody."

"Well good," Eddie said. "You thank him for me, and you tell him that I'm back,

his goods are safe, and I can take care of Henry just like Henry always took care of me. You tell him I'll have a six-pack on ice and when Henry walks in the place we're going to split it and then we'll get in our car and come on into town and do the deal like it was supposed to be done. Like we talked about it."

"Balazar wants to see you, Eddie," Jack said. His voice was implacable, immovable. His head did not turn. "Get in the truck."

"Stick it where the sun doesn't shine, motherfucker," Eddie said, and started for the doors to his building.

8

It was a short distance but he had gotten barely halfway when Andolini's hand clamped on his upper arm with the paralyzing force of a vise-grip. His breath as hot as a bull's on the back of Eddie's neck. He did all this in the time you would have thought, looking at him, it would have taken his brain to convince his hand to pull the door-handle up.

Eddie turned around.

Be cool, Eddie, Roland whispered.

Cool, Eddie responded.

"I could kill you for that," Andolini said. "No one tells me stick it up my ass, especially no shitass little junkie like you."

"Kill shit!" Eddie screamed at him—but it was a calculated scream. A cool scream, if you could dig that. They stood there, dark figures in the golden horizontal light of late spring sundown in the wasteland of housing developments that is the Bronx's Co-Op City, and people heard the scream, and people heard the word kill, and if their radios were on they turned them up and if their radios were off they turned them on and then turned them up because it was better that way, safer.

"Rico Balazar broke his word! I stood up for him and he didn't stand up for me! So I tell you to stick it up your fuckin ass, I tell him to stick it up his fuckin ass, I tell anybody I want to stick it up his fuckin ass!"

Andolini looked at him. His eyes were so brown the color seemed to have leaked into his corneas, turning them the yellow of old parchment.

"I tell President Reagan to stick it up his ass if he breaks his word to me, and fuck his fuckin rectal palp or whatever it is!"

The words died away in echoes on brick and concrete. A single child, his skin very black against his white basketball shorts and high-topped sneakers, stood in the playground across the street, watching them, a basketball held loosely against his side in the crook of his elbow.

"You done?" Andolini asked when the last of the echoes were gone.

"Yes," Eddie said in a completely normal tone of voice.

"Okay," Andolini said. He spread his anthropoid fingers and smiled . . . and when he smiled, two things happened simultaneously: the first was that you saw a charm that was so surprising it had a way of leaving people defenseless; the second was that you saw how bright he really was. How dangerously bright. "Now can we start over?"

Eddie brushed his hands through his hair, crossed his arms briefly so he could scratch both arms at the same time, and said, "I think we better, because this is going nowhere."

"Okay," Andolini said. "No one has said nothing, and no one has ranked out

nobody." And without turning his head or breaking the rhythm of his speech he added, "Get back in the truck, dumb wit."

Col Vincent, who had climbed cautiously out of the delivery truck through the door Andolini had left open retreated so fast he thumped his head. He slid across the seat and slouched in his former place, rubbing it and sulking.

"You gotta understand the deal changed when the Customs people put the arm on you," Andolini said reasonably. "Balazar is a big man. He has interests to protect. People to protect. One of those people, it just so happens, is your brother Henry. You think that's bullshit? If you do, you better think about the way Henry is now."

"Henry's fine," Eddie said, but he knew better and he couldn't keep the knowing out of his voice. He heard it and knew Jack Andolini heard it, too. These days Henry was always on the nod, it seemed like. There were holes in his shirts from cigarette burns. He had cut the shit out of his hand using the electric can-opener on a can of Calo for Potzie, their cat. Eddie didn't know how you cut yourself with an electric can-opener, but Henry had managed it. Sometimes the kitchen table would be powdery with Henry's leavings, or Eddie would find blackened curls of char in the bathroom sink.

Henry, he would say, Henry, you gotta take care of this, this is getting out of hand, you're a bust walking around and waiting to happen.

Yeah, okay, little brother, Henry would respond, zero perspiration, I got it all under control, but sometimes, looking at Henry's ashy face and burned out eyes, Eddie knew Henry was never going to have anything under control again.

What he wanted to say to Henry and couldn't had nothing to do with Henry getting busted or getting them both busted. What he wanted to say was Henry, it's like you're looking for a room to die in. That's how it looks to me, and I want you to fucking quit it. Because if you die, what did I live for?

"Henry isn't fine," Jack Andolini said. "He needs someone to watch out for him. He needs—what's that song say? A bridge over troubled waters. That's what Henry needs. A bridge over troubled waters. If Roche is being that bridge."

If Roche is a bridge to hell, Eddie thought. Out loud he said, "That's where Henry is? At Balazar's place?"

"Yes."

"I give him his goods, he gives me Henry?"

"And your goods," Andolini said, "don't forget that."

"The deal goes back to normal, in other words."

"Right."

"Now tell me you think that's really gonna happen. Come on, Jack. Tell me. I wanna see if you can do it with a straight face. And if you can do it with a straight face, I wanna see how much your nose grows."

"I don't understand you, Eddie."

"Sure you do. Balazar thinks I've got his goods? If he thinks that, he must be stupid, and I know he's not stupid."

"I don't know what he thinks," Andolini said serenely. "It's not my job to know what he thinks. He knows you had his goods when you left the Islands, he knows Customs grabbed you and then let you go, he knows you're here and not on your way to Riker's, he knows his goods have to be somewhere."

"And he knows Customs is still all over me like a wetsuit on a skin-diver, because you know it, and you sent him some kind of coded message on the truck's radio. Something like 'Double cheese, hold the anchovies,' right, Jack?"

Jack Andolini said nothing and looked serene.

"Only you were just telling him something he already knew. Like connecting the dots in a picture you can already see what it is."

Andolini stood in the golden sunset light that was slowly turning furnace orange and continued to look serene and continued to say nothing at all.

"He thinks they turned me. He thinks they're running me. He thinks I might be stupid enough to run. I don't exactly blame him. I mean, why not? A smackhead will do anything. You want to check, see if I'm wearing a wire?"

"I know you're not," Andolini said. "I got something in the van. It's like a fuzz-buster, only it picks up short-range radio transmissions. And for what it's worth, I don't think you're running for the Feds."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. So do we get in the van and go into the city or what?"

"Do I have a choice?"

No, Roland said inside his head.

"No," Andolini said.

Eddie went back to the van. The kid with the basketball was still standing across the street, his shadow now so long it was a gantry.

"Get out of here, kid," Eddie said. "You were never here, you never saw nothing or no one. Fuck off."

The kid ran.

Col was grinning at him.

"Push over, champ," Eddie said.

"I think you oughtta sit in the middle, Eddie."

"Push over," Eddie said again. Col looked at him, then looked at Andolini, who did not look at him but only pulled the driver's door closed and looked serenely straight ahead like Buddha on his day off, leaving them to work the seating arrangements out for themselves. Col glanced back at Eddie's face and decided to push over.

They headed into New York—and although the gunslinger (who could only stare wonderingly at spires even greater and more graceful, bridges that spanned a wide river like steel cobwebs, and rotored air-carriages that hovered like strange man-made insects) did not know it, the place they were headed for was the Tower.

9

Like Andolini, Enrico Balazar did not think Eddie Dean was running for the Feds; like Andolini, Balazar knew it.

The bar was empty. The sign on the door read CLOSED TONITE ONLY. Balazar sat in his office, waiting for Andolini and Col Vincent to arrive with the Dean kid.

His two personal body-guards, Claudio Andolini, Jack's brother, and 'Cimi Dretto, were with him. They sat on the sofa to the left of Balazar's large desk, watching, fascinated, as the edifice Balazar was building grew. The door was open. Beyond the door was a short hallway. To the right it led to the back of the bar and the little kitchen beyond, where a few simple pasta dishes were prepared. To the left was the accountant's office and the storage room. In the accountant's office three more of Balazar's "gentlemen"—this was how they were

known—were playing Trivial Pursuit with Henry Dean.

"Okay," George Biondi was saying, "here's an easy one, Henry. Henry? You there, Henry? Earth to Henry, Earth peo-ple need you. Come in, Henry. I say again: come in, H—"

"I'm here, I'm here," Henry said. His voice was the slurry, muddy voice of a man who is still asleep telling his wife he's awake so she'll leave him alone for another five minutes.

"Okay. The category is Arts and Entertainment. The question is ... Henry? Don't you fuckin nod off on me, asshole!"

"I'm not!" Henry cried back querulously.

"Okay. The question is, 'What enormously popular novel by William Peter Blatty, set in the posh Washington D.C. suburb of Georgetown, concerned the demonic possession of a young girl?' "

"Johnny Cash," Henry replied.

"Jesus Christ!" Tricks Postino yelled. "That's what you say to every thin! Johnny Cash, that's what you say to fuckin everythin!"

"Johnny Cash is everything," Henry replied gravely, and there was a moment of silence palpable in its considering surprise. . . then a gravelly burst of laughter not just from the men in the room with Henry but the two other "gentlemen" sitting in the storage room.

"You want me to shut the door, Mr. Balazar?" 'Cimi asked quietly.

"No, that's fine," Balazar said. He was second-generation Sicilian, but there was no trace of accent in his speech, nor was it the speech of a man whose only education had been in the streets. Unlike many of his contemporaries in the business, he had finished high school. Had in fact done more: for two years he had gone to business school—NYU. His voice, like his business methods, was quiet and cultured and American, and this made his physical aspect as deceiving as Jack Andolini's. People hearing his clear, unaccented American voice for the first time almost always looked dazed, as if hearing a particularly good piece of ventriloquism. He looked like a farmer or innkeeper or small-time mafioso who had been successful more by virtue of being at the right place at the right time than because of any brains. He looked like what the wiseguys of a previous generation had called a "Mustache Pete." He was a fat man who dressed like a peasant. This evening he wore a plain white cotton shirt open at the throat (there were spreading sweat-stains beneath the arms) and plain gray twill pants. On his fat sockless feet were brown loafers, so old they were more like slippers than shoes. Blue and purple varicose veins squirmed on his ankles. 'Cimi and Claudio watched him, fascinated.

In the old days they had called him Roche—The Rock. Some of the old-timers still did. Always in the right-hand top drawer of his desk, where other businessmen might keep pads, pens, paper-clips, things of that sort, Enrico Balazar kept three decks of cards. He did not play games with them, however.

He built with them.

He would take two cards and lean them against each other, making an A without the horizontal stroke. Next to it he would make another A-shape. Over the top of the two he would lay a single card, making a roof. He would make A after A, overlaying each, until his desk supported a house of cards. You bent over and looked in, you saw something that looked like a hive of triangles. 'Cimi had seen these houses fall over hundreds of times (Claudio had also seen it happen from time to time, but not so frequently, because he was thirty years younger



than 'Cimi, who expected to soon retire with his bitch of a wife to a farm they owned in northern New Jersey, where he would devote all his time to his garden. . . and to outliving the bitch he had married; not his mother-in-law, he had long since given up any wistful notion he might once have had of eating fettucini at the wake of La Monstra, La Monstra was eternal, but for outliving the bitch there was at least some hope; his father had had a saying which, when translated, meant something like "God pisses down the back of your neck every day but only drowns you once," and while 'Cimi wasn't completely sure he thought it meant God was a pretty good guy after all, and so he could hope to outlive the one if not the other), but had only seen Balazar put out of temper by such a fall on a single occasion. Mostly it was something errant that did it—someone closing a door hard in another room, or a drunk stumbling against a wall; there had been times when 'Cimi saw an edifice Mr. Balazar (whom he still called Da Boss, like a character in a Chester Gould comic strip) had spent hours building fall down because the bass on the juke was too loud. Other times these airy constructs fell down for no per-ceptible reason at all. Once—this was a story he had told at least five thousand times, and one of which every person he knew (with the exception of himself) had tired—Da Boss had looked up at him from the ruins and said: "You see this 'Cimi? For every mother who ever cursed God for her child dead in the road, for every father who ever cursed the man who sent him | away from the factory with no job, for every child who was ever born to pain and asked why, this is the answer. Our lives are like these things I build. Sometimes they fall down for a I reason, sometimes they fall down for no reason at all."

Carlocimi Dretto thought this the most profound state-ment of the human condition he had ever heard.

That one time Balazar had been put out of temper by the collapse of one of his structures had been twelve, maybe four-teen years ago. There was a guy who came in to see him about booze. A guy with no class, no manners. A guy who smelled like he took a bath once a year whether he needed it or not. A mick, in other words. And of course it was booze. With micks it was always booze, never dope. And this mick, he thought what was on Da Boss's desk was a joke. "Make a wish!" he yelled after Da Boss had explained to him, in the way one gentleman explains to another, why it was impossible for them to do business. And then the mick, one of those guys with curly red hair and a complexion so white he looked like he had TB or something, one of those guys whose names started with O and then had that little curly mark between the O and the real name, had blown on Da Boss's desk, like a nino blowing out the candles on a birthday cake, and cards flew everywhere around Balazar's head, and Balazar had opened the left top drawer in his desk, the drawer where other businessmen might keep their personal stationery or their private memos or some-thing like that, and he had brought out a .45, and he had shot the Mick in the head, and Balazar's expression never changed, and after 'Cimi and a guy named Truman Alexander who had died of a heart attack four years ago had buried the Mick under a chickenhouse somewhere outside of Sedonville, Connecti-cut, Balazar had said to 'Cimi, "It's up to men to build things, paisan. It's up to God to blow them down. You agree?"

"Yes, Mr. Balazar," 'Cimi had said. He did agree.

Balazar had nodded, pleased. "You did like I said? You put him someplace where chickens or ducks or something like that could shit on him?"

"Yes."

"That's very good," Balazar said calmly, and took a fresh deck of cards from the right top drawer of his desk.

One level was not enough for Balazar, Roche. Upon the roof of the first level he would build a second, only not quite so wide; on top of the second a third; on top of the third a fourth. He would go on, but after the fourth level he would have to stand to do so. You no longer had to bend much to look in, and when you did what you saw wasn't rows of triangle shapes but a fragile, bewildering, and impossibly lovely hall of diamond-shapes. You looked in too long, you felt dizzy. Once 'Cimi had gone in the Mirror Maze at Coney and he had felt like that. He had never gone in again.

'Cimi said (he believed no one believed him; the truth was no one cared one way or the other) he had once seen Balazar build something which was no longer a house of cards but a tower of cards, one which stood nine levels high before it collapsed. That no one gave a shit about this was something 'Cimi didn't know because everyone he told affected amaze-ment because he was close to Da Boss. But they would have been amazed if he had had the words to describe it—how delicate it had been, how it reached almost three quarters of the way from the top of the desk to the ceiling, a lacy construct of jacks and deuces and kings and tens and Big Akers, a red and black configuration of paper diamonds standing in defiance of a world spinning through a universe of incoherent motions and forces; a tower that seemed to 'Cimi's amazed eyes to be a ringing denial of all the unfair paradoxes of life.

If he had known how, he would have said: I looked at what he built, and to me it explained the stars.

10

Balazar knew how everything would have to be.

The Feds had smelled Eddie—maybe he had been stupid to send Eddie in the first place, maybe his instincts were failing him, but Eddie had seemed somehow so right, so perfect. His uncle, the first man he had worked for in the business, said there were exceptions to every rule but one: Never trust a junkie. Balazar had said nothing—it was not the place of a boy of fifteen to speak, even if only to agree—but privately had thought the only rule to which there was no exception was that there were some rules for which that was not true.

But if Tio Verone were alive today, Balazar thought, he would laugh at you and say look, Rico, you always were too smart for your own good, you knew the rules, you kept your mouth shut when it was respectful to keep it shut, but you always had that snot look in your eyes. You always knew too much about how smart you were, and so you finally fell into the pit of your own pride, just like I always knew you would.

He made an A shape and overlaid it.

They had taken Eddie and held him awhile and then let him go.

Balazar had grabbed Eddie's brother and the stash they shared. That would be enough to bring him . . . and he wanted Eddie.

He wanted Eddie because it had only been two hours, and two hours was wrong.

They had questioned him at Kennedy, not at 43rd Street, and that was wrong, too.

That meant Eddie had succeeded in ditching most or all of the coke.

Or had he?

He thought. He wondered.

Eddie had walked out of Kennedy two hours after they took him off the plane. That was too short a time for them to have sweated it out of him and too long for them to have decided he was clean, that some stew had made a rash mistake. He thought. He wondered.

Eddie's brother was a zombie, but Eddie was still smart, Eddie was still tough. He wouldn't have turned in just two hours . . . unless it was his brother.

Something about his brother.

But still, how come no 43rd Street? How come no Cus-toms van, the ones that looked like Post Office trucks except for the wire grilles on the back windows? Because Eddie really had done something with the goods? Ditched them? Hidden them?

Impossible to hide goods on an airplane.

Impossible to ditch them.

Of course it was also impossible to escape from certain prisons, rob certain banks, beat certain raps. But people did. Harry Houdini had escaped from strait-jackets, locked trunks, fucking bank vaults. But Eddie Dean was no Houdini.

Was he?

He could have had Henry killed in the apartment, could have had Eddie cut down on the L.I.E. or, better yet, also in the apartment, where it would look to the cops like a couple of junkies who got desperate enough to forget they were brothers and killed each other. But it would leave too many questions unanswered.

He would get the answers here, prepare for the future or merely satisfy his curiosity, depending on what the answers were, and then kill both of them.

A few more answers, two less junkies. Some gain and no great loss.

In the other room, the game had gotten around to Henry again. "Okay, Henry," George Biondi said. "Be careful, because this one is tricky. The category is Geography. The question is, 'What is the only continent where kangaroos are a native form of life?' "

A hushed pause.

"Johnny Cash," Henry said, and this was followed by a bull-throated roar of laughter.

The walls shook.

'Cimi tensed, waiting for Balazar's house of cards (which would become a tower only if God, or the blind forces that ran the universe in His name, willed it), to fall down.

The cards trembled a bit. If one fell, all would fall.

None did.

Balazar looked up and smiled at 'Cimi. "Piasan," he said. "Il Dio est bono; il Dio est malo; temps est poco-poco; tu est une grande peeparollo."

'Cimi smiled. "Si, senior," he said. "lo grande peeparollo; lo va fanculo por tu."

"None va fanculo, catzarro," Balazar said. "Eddie Dean va fanculo." He smiled gently, and began on the second level of his tower of cards.

When the van pulled to the curb near Balazar's place, Col Vincent happened to be looking at Eddie. He saw something impossible. He tried to speak and found

himself unable. His tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth and all he could get out was a muffled grunt.  
He saw Eddie's eyes change from brown to blue.

12

This time Roland made no conscious decision to come forward. He simply leaped without thinking, a movement as involuntary as rolling out of a chair and going for his guns when someone burst into a room.

The Tower! he thought fiercely. It's the Tower, my God, the Tower is in the sky, the Tower! I see the Tower in the sky, drawn in lines of red fire! Cuthbert! Alan! Desmond! The Tower! The T—

But this time he felt Eddie struggling—not against him, but trying to talk to him, trying desperately to explain some-thing to him.

The gunslinger retreated, listening—listening desper-ately, as above a beach some unknown distance away in space and time, his mindless body twitched and trembled like the body of a man experiencing a dream of highest ecstasy or deepest horror.

13

Sign! Eddie was screaming into his own head . . . and into the head of that other.

It's a sign, just a neon sign, I don't know what tower it is you're thinking about but this is just a bar, Balazar's place, The Leaning Tower, he named it that after the one in Pisa! It's just a sign that's supposed to look like the fucking Leaning Tower of Pisa! Let up! Let up! You want to get us killed before we have a chance to go at them?

Pitsa? the gunslinger replied doubtfully, and looked again.

A sign. Yes, all right, he could see now: it was not the Tower, but a Signpost. It leaned to one side, and there were many scalloped curves, and it was a marvel, but that was all. He could see now that the sign was a thing made of tubes, tubes which had somehow been filled with glowing red swamp-fire. In some places there seemed to be less of it than others; in those places the lines of fire pulsed and buzzed.

He now saw letters below the tower which had been made of shaped tubes; most of them were Great Letters. TOWER he could read, and yes, LEANING. LEANING TOWER. The first word was three letters, the first T, the last E, the middle one which he had never seen.

Tre? he asked Eddie.

THE. It doesn't matter. Do you see it's just a sign? That's what matters!

I see, the gunslinger answered, wondering if the prisoner really believed what he was saying or was only saying it to keep the situation from spilling over as the tower depicted in those lines of fire seemed about to do, wondering if Eddie believed any sign could be a trivial thing.

Then ease off! Do you hear me? Ease off!

Be cool? Roland asked, and both felt Roland smile a little in Eddie's mind.

Be cool, right. Let me handle things.

Yes. All right. He would let Eddie handle things.

For awhile.

Col Vincent finally managed to get his tongue off the roof of his mouth. "Jack."

His voice was as thick as shag carpet.

Andolini turned off the motor and looked at him, irritated.

"His eyes."

"What about his eyes?"

"Yeah, what about my eyes?" Eddie asked.

Col looked at him.

The sun had gone down, leaving nothing in the air but the day's ashes, but there was light enough for Col to see that Eddie's eyes were brown again.

If they had ever been anything else.

You saw it, part of his mind insisted, but had he? Col was twenty-four, and for the last twenty-one of those years no one had really believed him trustworthy.

Useful sometimes. Obe-dient almost always... if kept on a short leash.

Trustworthy? No. Col had eventually come to believe it himself.

"Nothing," he muttered.

"Then let's go," Andolini said.

They got out of the pizza van. With Andolini on their left and Vincent on their right, Eddie and the gunslinger walked into The Leaning Tower.

## CHAPTER 5 SHOWDOWN AND SHOOT-OUT

1

In a blues tune from the twenties Billie Holiday, who would one day discover the truth for herself, sang: "Doctor tole me daughter you got to quit it fast/Because one more rocket gonna be your last." Henry Dean's last rocket went up just five minutes before the van pulled up in front of The Leaning Tower and his brother was herded inside.

Because he was on Henry's right, George Biondi—known to his friends as "Big George" and to his enemies as "Big Nose"—asked Henry's questions. Now, as Henry sat nodding and blinking owlshly over the board, Tricks Postino put the die in a hand which had already gone the dusty color that results in the extremities after long-term heroin addiction, the dusty color which is the precursor of gangrene.

"Your turn, Henry," Tricks said, and Henry let the die fall from his hand.

When he went on staring into space and showed no intention of moving his game piece, Jimmy Haspio moved it for him. "Look at this, Henry," he said. "You got a chance to score a piece of the pie."

"Reese's Pieces," Henry said dreamily, and then looked around, as if awakening.

"Where's Eddie?"

"He'll be here pretty soon," Tricks soothed him. "Just play the game."

"How about a fix?"

"Play the game, Henry."

"Okay, okay, stop leaning on me."

"Don't lean on him," Kevin Blake said to Jimmy.

"Okay, I won't," Jimmy said.

"You ready?" George Biondi said, and gave the others an enormous wink as Henry's chin floated down to his breast-bone and then slowly rose once more—it was like watching a soaked log not quite ready to give in and sink for good.

"Yeah," Henry said. "Bring it on."

"Bring it on!" Jimmy Haspio cried happily.

"You bring that fucker!" Tricks agreed, and they all roared with laughter (in the other room Balazar's edifice, now three levels high, trembled again, but did not fall).

"Okay, listen close," George said, and winked again. Although Henry was on a Sports category, George announced the category was Arts and Entertainment. "What popular country and western singer had hits with 'A Boy Named Sue,' 'Folsom Prison Blues,' and numerous other shitkicking songs?"

Kevin Blake, who actually could add seven and nine (if you gave him poker chips to do it with), howled with laughter, clutching his knees and nearly upsetting the board.

Still pretending to scan the card in his hand, George continued: "This popular singer is also known as The Man in Black. His first name means the same as a place you go to take a piss and his last name means what you got in your wallet unless you're a fucking needle freak."

There was a long expectant silence.

"Walter Brennan," Henry said at last.

Bellows of laughter. Jimmy Haspio clutched Kevin Blake. Kevin punched Jimmy in the shoulder repeatedly. In Balazar's office, the house of cards which was now becoming a tower of cards trembled again.

"Quiet down!" Cimi yelled. "Da Boss is buildin!"

They quieted at once.

"Right," George said. "You got that one right, Henry. It was a toughie, but you came through."

"Always do," Henry said. "Always come through in the fuckin clutch. How about a fix?"

"Good idea!" George said, and took a Roi-Tan cigar box from behind him. From it he produced a hypo. He stuck it into the scarred vein above Henry's elbow, and Henry's last rocket took off.

2

The pizza van's exterior was grungy, but underneath the road-filth and spray-paint was a high-tech marvel the DEA guys would have envied. As Balazar had said on more than one occasion, you couldn't beat the bastards unless you could compete with the bastards—unless you could match their equipment. It was expensive stuff, but Balazar's side had an advantage: they stole what the DEA had to buy at grossly inflated prices. There were electronics company employees all the way down the Eastern Seaboard willing to sell you top secret stuff at bargain basement prices. These catzzaroni (Jack Andolini called them Silicon Valley Coke-Heads) practically threw the stuff at you.

Under the dash was a fuzz-buster; a UHF police radar jammer; a high-range/high frequency radio transmissions detector; an h-r/hf jammer; a transponder-amplifier that would make anyone trying to track the van by standard

triangulation methods decide it was simultaneously in Connecticut, Harlem, and Montauk Sound; a radio-telephone . . . and a small red button which Andolini pushed as soon as Eddie Dean got out of the van.

In Balazar's office the intercom uttered a single short buzz.

"That's them," he said. "Claudio, let them in. 'Cimi, you tell everyone to dummy up. So far as Eddie Dean knows, no one's with me but you and Claudio. 'Cimi, go in the store-room with the other gentlemen."

They went, 'Cimi turning left, Claudio Andolini going right.

Calmly, Balazar started on another level of his edifice.

3

Just let me handle it, Eddie said again as Claudio opened the door.

Yes, the gunslinger said, but remained alert, ready to come forward the instant it seemed necessary.

Keys rattled. The gunslinger was very aware of odors— old sweat from Col Vincent on his right, some sharp, almost acerbic aftershave from Jack Andolini on his left, and, as they stepped into the dimness, the sour tang of beer.

The smell of beer was all he recognized. This was no tumble-down saloon with sawdust on the floor and planks set across sawhorses for a bar—it was as far from a place like Sheb's in Tull as you could get, the gunslinger reckoned.

Glass gleamed mellowly everywhere, more glass in this one room than he had seen in all the years since his childhood, when supply-lines had begun to break down, partially because of interdicting raids carried out by the rebel forces of Parson, the Good Man, but mostly, he thought, simply because the world was moving on. Farson had been a symptom of that great movement, not the cause. He saw their reflections everywhere—on the walls, on the glass-faced bar and the long mirror behind it; he could even see them reflected as curved miniatures in the graceful bell-shapes of wine glasses hung upside down above the bar. . . glasses as gorgeous and fragile as festival ornaments.

In one corner was a sculpted creation of lights that rose and changed, rose and changed, rose and changed. Gold to green; green to yellow; yellow to red; red to gold again. Written across it in Great Letters was a word he could read but which meant nothing to him: ROCKOLA.

Never mind. There was business to be done here. He was no tourist; he must not allow himself the luxury of behaving like one, no matter how wonderful or strange these things might be.

The man who had let them in was clearly the brother of the man who drove what Eddie called the van (as in vanguard, Roland supposed), although he was much taller and perhaps five years younger. He wore a gun in a shoulder-rig.

"Where's Henry?" Eddie asked. "I want to see Henry." He raised his voice.

"Henry! Hey, Henry!"

No reply; only silence in which the glasses hung over the bar seemed to shiver with a delicacy that was just beyond the range of a human ear.

"Mr. Balazar would like to speak to you first."

"You got him gagged and tied up somewhere, don't you?" Eddie asked, and before Claudio could do more than open his mouth to reply, Eddie laughed. "No, what am I thinking about—you got him stoned, that's all. Why would you bother with ropes and gags when all you have to do to keep Henry quiet is needle him? Okay. Take

me to Balazar. Let's get this over with."

4

The gunslinger looked at the tower of cards on Balazar's desk and thought:  
Another sign.

Balazar did not look up—the tower of cards had grown too tall for that to be necessary—but rather over the top. His expression was one of pleasure and warmth.

"Eddie," he said. "I'm glad to see you, son. I heard you had some trouble at Kennedy."

"I ain't your son," Eddie said flatly.

Balazar made a little gesture that was at the same time comic, sad, and untrustworthy: You hurt me, Eddie, it said, you hurt me when you say a thing like that.

"Let's cut through it," Eddie said. "You know it comes down to one thing or the other: either the Feds are running me or they had to let me go. You know they didn't sweat it out of me in just two hours. And you know if they had I'd be down at 43rd Street, answering questions between an occasional break to puke in the basin."

"Are they running you, Eddie?" Balazar asked mildly.

"No. They had to let me go. They're following, but I'm not leading."

"So you ditched the stuff," Balazar said. "That's fascinat-ing. You must tell me how one ditches two pounds of coke when that one is on a jet plane. It would be handy information to have. It's like a locked room mystery story."

"I didn't ditch it," Eddie said, "but I don't have it any-more, either."

"So who does?" Claudio asked, then blushed when his brother looked at him with dour ferocity.

"He does," Eddie said, smiling, and pointed at Enrico Balazar over the tower of cards. "It's already been delivered."

For the first time since Eddie had been escorted into the office, a genuine expression illuminated Balazar's face: sur-prise. Then it was gone. He smiled politely.

"Yes," he said. "To a location which will be revealed later, after you have your brother and your goods and are gone. To Iceland, maybe. Is that how it's supposed to go?"

"No," Eddie said. "You don't understand. It's here. Deliv-ery right to your door. Just like we agreed. Because even in this day and age, there are some people who still believe in living up to the deal as it was originally cut.

Amazing, I know, but true."

They were all staring at him.

How'm I doing, Roland? Eddie asked.

I think you are doing very well. But don't let this man Balazar get his balance, Eddie. I think he's dangerous.

You think so, huh? Well, I'm one up on you there, my friend. I know he's dangerous. Very fucking dangerous.

He looked at Balazar again, and dropped him a little wink. "That's why you're the one who's gotta be concerned with the Feds now, not me. If they turn up with a search warrant, you could suddenly find yourself fucked without even opening your legs, Mr. Balazar."



Balazar had picked up two cards. His hands suddenly shook and he put them aside. It was minute, but Roland saw it and Eddie saw it, too. An expression of uncertainty—even momentary fear, perhaps—appeared and then disappeared on his face.

"Watch your mouth with me, Eddie. Watch how you express yourself, and please remember that my time and my tolerance for nonsense are both short."

Jack Andolini looked alarmed.

"He made a deal with them, Mr. Balazar! This little shit turned over the coke and they planted it while they were pretending to question him!"

"No one has been in here," Balazar said. "No one could get close, Jack, and you know it. Beepers go when a pigeon farts on the roof."

"But—"

"Even if they had managed to set us up somehow, we have so many people in their organization we could drill fifteen holes in their case in three days. We'd know who, when, and how."

Balazar looked back at Eddie.

"Eddie," he said, "you have fifteen seconds to stop bull-shitting. Then I'm going to have 'Cimi Dretto step in here and hurt you. Then, after he hurts you for awhile, he will leave, and from a room close by you will hear him hurting your brother."

Eddie stiffened.

Easy, the gunslinger murmured, and thought, All you have to do to hurt him is to say his brother's name. It's like poking an open sore with a stick.

"I'm going to walk into your bathroom," Eddie said. He pointed at a door in the far left corner of the room, a door so unobtrusive it could almost have been one of the wall panels. "I'm going in by myself. Then I'm going to walk back out with a pound of your cocaine. Half the shipment. You test it. Then you bring Henry in here where I can look at him. When I see him, see he's okay, you are going to give him our goods and he's going to ride home with one of your gentlemen. While he does, me and. . ." Roland, he almost said, ". . . me and the rest of the guys we both know you got here can watch you build that thing. When Henry's home and safe—which means no one standing there with a gun in his ear—he's going to call and say a certain word. This is something we worked out before I left. Just in case."

The gunslinger checked Eddie's mind to see if this was true or bluff. It was true, or at least Eddie thought it was. Roland saw Eddie really believed his brother Henry would die before saying that word in falsity. The gunslinger was not so sure.

"You must think I still believe in Santa Claus," Balazar said.

"I know you don't."

"Claudio. Search him. Jack, you go in my bathroom and search it. Everything."

"Is there any place in there I wouldn't know about?" Andolini asked.

Balazar paused for a long moment, considering Andolini carefully with his dark brown eyes. "There is a small panel on the back wall of the medicine cabinet," he said. "I keep a few personal things in there. It is not big enough to hide a pound of dope in, but maybe you better check it."

Jack left, and as he entered the little privy, the gunslinger saw a flash of the same frozen white light that had illuminated the privy of the air-carriage. Then the door shut.

Balazar's eyes flicked back to Eddie.

"Why do you want to tell such crazy lies?" he asked, almost sorrowfully. "I thought you were smart."

"Look in my face," Eddie said quietly, "and tell me that I am lying."

Balazar did as Eddie asked. He looked for a long time. Then he turned away, hands stuffed in his pockets so deeply that the crack of his peasant's ass showed a little. His posture was one of sorrow—sorrow over an erring son—but before he turned Roland had seen an expression on Balazar's face that had not been sorrow. What Balazar had seen in Eddie's face had left him not sorrowful but profoundly disturbed.

"Strip," Claudio said, and now he was holding his gun on Eddie. Eddie started to take his clothes off.

5

I don't like this, Balazar thought as he waited for Jack Andolini to come back out of the bathroom. He was scared, suddenly sweating not just under his arms or in his crotch, places where he sweated even when it was the dead of winter and colder than a well-digger's belt-buckle, but all over. Eddie had gone off looking like a junkie—a smart junkie but still a junkie, someone who could be led anywhere by the skag fishhook in his balls—and had come back looking like . . . like what? Like he'd grown in some way, changed.

It's like somebody poured two quarts of fresh guts down his throat.

Yes. That was it. And the dope. The fucking dope. Jack was tossing the bathroom and Claudio was checking Eddie with the thorough ferocity of a sadistic prison guard; Eddie had stood with a stolidity Balazar would not previously have believed possible for him or any other dooper while Claudio spat four times into his left palm, rubbed the snot-flecked spittle all over his right hand, then rammed it up Eddie's asshole to the wrist and an inch or two beyond.

There was no dope in his bathroom, no dope on Eddie or in him. There was no dope in Eddie's clothes, his jacket, or his travelling bag. So it was all nothing but a bluff.

Look in my face and tell me that I am lying.

So he had. What he saw was upsetting. What he saw was that Eddie Dean was perfectly confident: he intended to go into the bathroom and come back with half of Balazar's goods.

Balazar almost believed it himself.

Claudio Andolini pulled his arm back. His fingers came out of Eddie Dean's asshole with a plopping sound. Claudio's mouth twisted like a fishline with knots in it.

"Hurry up, Jack, I got this junkie's shit on my hand!" Claudio yelled angrily.

"If I'd known you were going to be prospecting up there, Claudio, I would have wiped my ass with a chair-leg last time I took a dump," Eddie said mildly. "Your hand would have come out cleaner and I wouldn't be standing here feeling like I just got raped by Ferdinand the Bull."

"Jack!"

"Go on down to the kitchen and clean yourself up," Balazar said quietly. "Eddie and I have got no reason to hurt each other. Do we, Eddie?"

"No," Eddie said.

"He's clean, anyway," Claudio said. "Well, clean ain't the word. What I mean is he ain't holding. You can be goddam sure of that." He walked out, holding his

dirty hand in front of him like a dead fish.

Eddie looked calmly at Balazar, who was thinking again of Harry Houdini, and Blackstone, and Doug Henning, and David Copperfield. They kept saying that magic acts were as dead as vaudeville, but Henning was a superstar and the Copperfield kid had blown the crowd away the one time Balazar had caught his act in Atlantic City. Balazar had loved magicians from the first time he had seen one on a streetcorner, doing card-tricks for pocket-change. And what was the first thing they always did before making something appear— something that would make the whole audience first gasp and then applaud? What they did was invite someone up from the audience to make sure that the place from which the rabbit or dove or bare-breasted cutie or the whatever was to appear was perfectly empty. More than that, to make sure there was no way to get anything inside.

I think maybe he's done it. I don't know how, and I don't care. The only thing I know for sure is that I don't like any of this, not one damn bit.

6

George Biondi also had something not to like. He doubted if Eddie Dean was going to be wild about it, either.

George was pretty sure that at some point after 'Cimi had come into the accountant's office and doused the lights, Henry had died. Died quietly, with no muss, no fuss, no bother. Had simply floated away like a dandelion spore on a light breeze. George thought maybe it had happened right around the time Claudio left to wash his shitty hand in the kitchen.

"Henry?" George muttered in Henry's ear. He put his mouth so close that it was like kissing a girl's ear in a movie theater, and that was pretty fucking gross, especially when you considered that the guy was probably dead—it was like narcophobia or whatever the fuck they called it—but he had to know, and the wall between this office and Balazar's was thin.

"What's wrong, George?" Tricks Postino asked.

"Shut up," 'Cimi said. His voice was the low rumble of an idling truck.

They shut up.

George slid a hand inside Henry's shirt. Oh, this was getting worse and worse. That image of being with a girl in a movie theater wouldn't leave him. Now here he was, feeling her up, only it wasn't a her but a him, this wasn't just narcophobia, it was fucking faggot narcophobia, and Henry's scrawny junkie's chest wasn't moving up and down, and there wasn't anything inside going thump-thump-thump. For Henry Dean it was all over, for Henry Dean the ball-game had been rained out in the seventh inning. Wasn't nothing ticking but his watch. He moved into the heavy Old Country atmosphere of olive oil and garlic that surrounded 'Cimi Dretto.

"I think we might have a problem," George whispered.

7

Jack came out of the bathroom.

"There's no dope in there," he said, and his flat eyes studied Eddie. "And if you were thinking about the window, you can forget it. That's ten-gauge steel mesh."

"I wasn't thinking about the window and it is in there," Eddie said quietly.

"You just don't know where to look."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Balazar," Andolini said, "but this crock is getting just a little too full for me."

Balazar studied Eddie as if he hadn't even heard Andolini. He was thinking very deeply.

Thinking about magicians pulling rabbits out of hats.

You got a guy from the audience to check out the fact that the hat was empty.

What other thing that never changed? That no one saw into the hat but the magician, of course. And what had the kid said? I'm going to walk into your bathroom. I'm going in by myself.

Knowing how a magic trick worked was something he usually wouldn't want to know; knowing spoiled the fun.

Usually.

This, however, was a trick he couldn't wait to spoil.

"Fine," he said to Eddie. "If it's in there, go get it. Just like you are.

Bare-ass."

"Good," Eddie said, and started toward the bathroom door.

"But not alone," Balazar said. Eddie stopped at once, his body stiffening as if Balazar had shot him with an invisible harpoon, and it did Balazar's heart good to see it. For the first time something hadn't gone according to the kid's plan.

"Jack's going with you."

"No," Eddie said at once. "That's not what I—"

"Eddie," Balazar said gently, "you don't tell me no.

That's one thing you never do."

8

It's all right, the gunslinger said. Let him come.

But. . . but...

Eddie was close to gibbering, barely holding onto his control. It wasn't just the sudden curve-ball Balazar had thrown him; it was his gnawing worry over Henry, and, grow-ing steadily ascendant over all else, his need for a fix.

Let him come. It will be all right. Listen:

Eddie listened.

9

Balazar watched him, a slim, naked man with only the first suggestion of the junkie's typical cave-chested slouch, his head cocked to one side, and as he watched Balazar felt some of his confidence evaporate. It was as if the kid was listening to a voice only he could hear.

The same thought passed through Andolini's mind, but in a different way: What's this? He looks like the dog on those old RCA Victor records!

Col had wanted to tell him something about Eddie's eyes. Suddenly Jack Andolini wished he had listened.

Wish in one hand, shit in the other, he thought.

If Eddie had been listening to voices inside his head, they had either quit talking or he had quit paying attention.

"Okay," he said. "Come along, Jack. I'll show you the Eighth Wonder of the World." He flashed a smile that neither Jack Andolini or Enrico Balazar cared

for in the slightest.

"Is that so?" Andolini pulled a gun from the clamshell holster attached to his belt at the small of his back. "Am I gonna be amazed?"

Eddie's smile widened. "Oh yeah. I think this is gonna knock your socks off."

10

Andolini followed Eddie into the bathroom\* He was holding the gun up because his wind was up.

"Close the door," Eddie said.

"Fuck you," Andolini answered.

"Close the door or no dope," Eddie said.

"Fuck you," Andolini said again. Now, a little scared, feeling that there was something going on that he didn't understand, Andolini looked brighter than he had in the van.

"He won't close the door," Eddie yelled at Balazar. "I'm getting ready to give up on you, Mr. Balazar. You probably got six wiseguys in this place, every one of them with about four guns, and the two of you are going batshit over a kid in a crapper. A. junkie kid."

"Shut the fucking door, Jack!" Balazar shouted.

"That's right," Eddie said as Jack Andolini kicked the door shut behind him. "Is you a man or is you a m—"

"Oh boy, ain't I had enough of this turd," Andolini said to no one in particular. He raised the gun, butt forward, meaning to pistol-whip Eddie across the mouth.

Then he froze, gun drawn up across his body, the snarl that bared his teeth slackening into a slack-jawed gape of surprise as he saw what Col Vincent had seen in the van.

Eddie's eyes changed from brown to blue.

"Now grab him!" a low, commanding voice said, and although the voice came from Eddie's mouth, it was not Eddie's voice.

Schizo, Jack Andolini thought. He's gone schizo, gone fucking schi—

But the thought broke off when Eddie's hands grabbed his shoulders, because when that happened, Andolini saw a hole in reality suddenly appear about three feet behind Eddie.

No, not a hole. Its dimensions were too perfect for that.

It was a door.

"Hail Mary fulla grace," Jack said in a low breathy moan. Through that doorway which hung in space a foot or so above the floor in front of Balazar's private shower he could see a dark beach which sloped down to crashing waves. Things were moving on that beach. Things.

He brought the gun down, but the blow which had been meant to break off all of Eddie's front teeth at the gum-line did no more than mash Eddie's lips back and bloody them a little.

All the strength was running out of him. Jack could feel it happening.

"I told you it was gonna knock your socks off, Jack," Eddie said, and then yanked him. Jack realized what Eddie meant to do at the last moment and began to fight like a wildcat, but it was too late—they were tumbling backward through that doorway, and the droning hum of New York City at night, so familiar and constant you never even heard it unless it wasn't there anymore, was replaced by

the grinding sound of the waves and the grating, questioning voices of dimly seen horrors crawling to and fro on the beach.

11

We'll have to move very fast, or we'll find ourselves basted in a hot oast, Roland had said, and Eddie was pretty sure the guy meant that if they didn't shuck and jive at damn near the speed of light, their geeses were going to be cooked. He believed it, too. When it came to hard guys, Jack Andolini was like Dwight Gooden: you could rock him, yes, you could shock him, maybe, but if you let him get away in the early innings he was going to stomp you flat later on. Left hand! Roland screamed at himself as they went through and he separated from Eddie. Remember! Left hand! Left hand! He saw Eddie and Jack stumble backward, fall, and then go rolling down the rocky scree that edged the beach, struggling for the gun in Andolini's hand. Roland had just time to think what a cosmic joke it would be if he arrived back in his own world only to discover that his physical body had died while he had been away. . . and then it was too late. Too late to wonder, too late to go back.

12

Andolini didn't know what had happened. Part of him was sure he had gone crazy, part was sure Eddie had doped him or gassed him or something like that, part believed that the vengeful God of his childhood had finally tired of his evils and had plucked him away from the world he knew and set him down in this weird purgatory.

Then he saw the door, standing open, spilling a fan of white light—the light from Balazar's John—onto the rocky ground—and understood it was possible to get back. Andolini was a practical man above all else. He would worry about what all this meant later on. Right now he intended to kill this creep's ass and get back through that door.

The strength that had gone out of him in his shocked surprise now flooded back. He realized Eddie was trying to pull his small but very efficient Colt Cobra out of his hand and had nearly succeeded. Jack pulled it back with a curse, tried to aim, and Eddie promptly grabbed his arm again.

Andolini hoisted a knee into the big muscle of Eddie's right thigh (the expensive gabardine of Andolini's slacks was now crusted with dirty gray beach sand) and Eddie screamed as the muscle seized up.

"Roland!" he cried. "Help me! For Christ's sake, help me!"

Andolini snapped his head around and what he saw threw him off-balance again. There was a guy standing there . . . only he looked more like a ghost than a guy. Not exactly Casper the Friendly Ghost, either. The swaying figure's white, haggard face was rough with beard-stubble. His shirt was in tatters which blew back behind him in twisted ribbons, showing the starved stack of his ribs. A filthy rag was wrapped around his right hand. He looked sick, sick and dying, but even so he also looked tough enough to make Andolini feel like a soft-boiled egg.

And the joker was wearing a pair of guns.

They looked older than the hills, old enough to have come from a Wild West

museum . . . but they were guns just the same, they might even really work, and Andolini suddenly realized he was going to have to take care of the white-faced man right away . . . unless he really was a spook, and if that was the case, it wouldn't matter fuck-all, so there was really no sense worrying about it.

Andolini let go of Eddie and snap-rolled to the right, barely feeling the edge of rock that tore open his five-hundred-dollar sport jacket. At the same instant the gunslinger drew left-handed, and his draw was as it had always been, sick or well, wide awake or still half asleep: faster than a streak of blue summer lightning.

I'm beat, Andolini thought, full of sick wonder. Christ, he's faster than anybody I ever saw! I'm beat, holy Mary Mother of God, he's gonna blow me away, he's g—

The man in the ragged shirt pulled the trigger of the revolver in his left hand and Jack Andolini thought—really thought—he was dead before he realized there had been only a dull click instead of a report.

Misfire.

Smiling, Andolini rose to his knees and raised his own gun.

"I don't know who you are, but you can kiss your ass good-bye, you fucking spook," he said.

13

Eddie sat up, shivering, his naked body pocked with goosebumps. He saw Roland draw, heard the dry snap that should have been a bang, saw Andolini come up on his knees, heard him say something, and before he really knew what he was doing his hand had found a ragged chunk of rock. He pulled it out of the grainy earth and threw it as hard as he could.

It struck Andolini high on the back of the head and bounced away. Blood sprayed from a ragged hanging flap in Jack Andolini's scalp. Andolini fired, but the bullet that surely would have killed the gunslinger otherwise went wild.

14

Not really wild, the gunslinger could have told Eddie. When you feel the wind of the slug on your cheek, you can't really call it wild.

He thumbed the hammer of his gun back and pulled the trigger again as he recoiled from Andolini's shot. This time the bullet in the chamber fired—the dry, authoritative crack echoed up and down the beach. Gulls asleep on rocks high above the lobstersties awoke and flew upward in screaming, startled packs. The gunslinger's bullet would have stopped Andolini for good in spite of his own involuntary recoil, but by then Andolini was also in motion, falling sideways, dazed by the blow on the head. The crack of the gunslinger's revolver seemed distant, but the searing poker it plunged into his left arm, shattering the elbow, was real enough. It brought him out of his daze and he rose to his feet, one arm hanging broken and useless, the gun wavering wildly about in his other hand, looking for a target.

It was Eddie he saw first, Eddie the junkie, Eddie who had somehow brought him to this crazy place. Eddie was standing there as naked as the day he had been born, shivering in the chilly wind, clutching himself with both arms. Well, he might die here, but he would at least have the pleasure of taking Eddie Fucking

Dean with him.

Andolini brought his gun up. The little Cobra now seemed to weigh about twenty pounds, but he managed.

15

This better not be another misfire, Roland thought grimly, and thumbed the hammer back again. Below the din of the gulls, he heard the smooth oiled click as the chamber revolved.

16

It was no misfire.

17

The gunslinger hadn't aimed at Andolini's head but at the gun in Andolini's hand. He didn't know if they still needed this man, but they might; he was important to Balazar, and because Balazar had proved to be every bit as dangerous as Roland had thought he might be, the best course was the safest one. His shot was good, and that was no surprise; what happened to Andolini's gun and hence to Andolini was. Roland had seen it happen, but only twice in all the years he had seen men fire guns at each other.

Bad luck for you, fellow, the gunslinger thought as Andolini wandered off toward the beach, screaming. Blood poured down his shirt and pants. The hand which had been holding the Colt Cobra was missing below the middle of the palm. The gun was a senseless piece of twisted metal lying on the sand.

Eddie stared at him, stunned. No one would ever mis-judge Jack Andolini's caveman face again, because now he had no face; where it had been there was now nothing but a churned mess of raw flesh and the black screaming hole of his mouth

"My God, what happened?"

"My bullet must have struck the cylinder of his gun at the second he pulled the trigger," the gunslinger said. He spoke as dryly as a professor giving a police academy ballistics lecture. "The result was an explosion that tore the back off his gun. I think one or two of the other cartridges may have exploded as well."

"Shoot him," Eddie said. He was shivering harder than ever, and now it wasn't just the combination of night air, sea breeze, and naked body that was causing it. "Kill him. Put him out of his misery, for God's s—"

"Too late," the gunslinger said with a cold indifference that chilled Eddie's flesh all the way in to the bone.

And Eddie turned away just too late to avoid seeing the lobstrosities swarm over Andolini's feet, tearing off his Gucci loafers. . . with the feet still inside them, of course. Screaming, waving his arms spasmodically before him, Andolini fell forward. The lobstrosities swarmed greedily over him, question-ing him anxiously all the while they were eating him alive: Dad-a-chack? Did-a-chick? Dum-a-chum? Dod-a-chock?

"Jesus," Eddie moaned. "What do we do now?"

"Now you get exactly as much of the  
(devil-powder the gunslinger said; cocaine Eddie heard)



as you promised the man Balazar," Roland said, "no more and no less. And we go back." He looked levelly at Eddie. "Only this time I have to go back with you. As myself."

"Jesus Christ," Eddie said. "Can you do that?" And at once answered his own question. "Sure you can. But why?"

"Because you can't handle this alone," Roland said. "Come here."

Eddie looked back at the squirming hump of clawed creatures on the beach. He had never liked Jack Andolini, but he felt his stomach roll over just the same.

"Come here," Roland said impatiently. "We've little time, and I have little liking for what I must do now. It's something I've never done before. Never thought I would do." His lips twisted bitterly. "I'm getting used to doing things like that."

Eddie approached the scrawny figure slowly, on legs that felt more and more like rubber. His bare skin was white and glimmering in the alien dark. Just who are you, Roland? he thought. What are you? And that heat I feel baking off you—is it just fever? Or some kind of madness? I think it might be both.

God, he needed a fix. More: he deserved a fix.

"Never done what before?" he asked. "What are you talk-ing about?"

"Take this," Roland said, and gestured at the ancient revolver slung low on his right hip. Did not point; there was no finger to point with, only a bulky, rag-wrapped bundle. "It's no good to me. Not now, perhaps never again."

"I. . ." Eddie swallowed. "I don't want to touch it."

"I don't want you to either," the gunslinger said with curious gentleness, "but I'm afraid neither of us has a choice. There's going to be shooting."

"There is?"

"Yes." The gunslinger looked serenely at Eddie. "Quite a lot of it, I think."

18

Balazar had become more and more uneasy. Too long. They had been in there too long and it was too quiet. Dis-tantly, maybe on the next block, he could hear people shout-ing at each other and then a couple of rattling reports that were probably firecrackers . . . but when you were in the sort of business Balazar was in, firecrackers weren't the first thing you thought of.

A scream. Was that a scream?

Never mind. Whatever's happening on the next block has nothing to do with you. You're turning into an old woman.

All the same, the signs were bad. Very bad.

"Jack?" he yelled at the closed bathroom door.

There was no answer.

Balazar opened the left front drawer of his desk and took out the gun. This was no Colt Cobra, cozy enough to fit in a clamshell holster; it was a .357 Magnum.

"'Cimi!" he shouted. "I want you!"

He slammed the drawer. The tower of cards fell with a soft, sighing thump.

Balazar didn't even notice.

'Cimi Dretto, all two hundred and fifty pounds of him, filled the doorway. He saw that Da Boss had pulled his gun out of the drawer, and 'Cimi immediately pulled his own from beneath a plaid jacket so loud it could have caused flash-burns on anyone who made the mistake of looking at it too long.

"I want Claudio and Tricks," he said. "Get them quick. The kid is up to

something."

"We got a problem," 'Cimi said.

Balazar's eyes flicked from the bathroom door to 'Cimi. "Oh, I got plenty of those already," he said. "What's this new one, 'Cimi?"

'Cimi licked his lips. He didn't like telling Da Boss bad news even under the best of circumstances; when he looked like this . . .

"Well," he said, and licked his lips. "You see—"

"Will you hurry the fuck up?" Balazar yelled.

19

The sandalwood grips of the revolver were so smooth that Eddie's first act upon receiving it was to nearly drop it on his toes. The thing was so big it looked prehistoric, so heavy he knew he would have to lift it two-handed. The recoil, he thought, is apt to drive me right through the nearest wall. That's if it fires at all. Yet there was some part of him that wanted to hold it, that responded to its perfectly expressed purpose, that sensed its dim and bloody history and wanted to be part of it.

No one but the best ever held this baby in his hand, Eddie thought. Until now, at least.

"Are you ready?" Roland asked.

"No, but let's do it," Eddie said.

He gripped Roland's left wrist with his left hand. Roland slid his hot right arm around Eddie's bare shoulders.

Together they stepped back through the doorway, from the windy darkness of the beach in Roland's dying world to the cool fluorescent glare of Balazar's private bathroom in The Leaning Tower.

Eddie blinked, adjusting his eyes to the light, and heard 'Cimi Dretto in the other room. "We got a problem," 'Cimi was saying. Don't we all, Eddie thought, and then his eyes riveted on Balazar's medicine chest. It was standing open. In his mind he heard Balazar telling Jack to search the bathroom, and heard Andolini asking if there was any place in there he wouldn't know about. Balazar had paused before replying. There is a small panel on the back wall of the medicine cabinet, he had said. I keep a few personal things in there.

Andolini had slid the metal panel open but had neglected to close it. "Roland!" he hissed.

Roland raised his own gun and pressed the barrel against his lips in a shushing gesture. Eddie crossed silently to the medicine chest.

A few personal things—there was a bottle of suppositories, a copy of a bleakly printed magazine called Child's Play (the cover depicting two naked girls of about eight engaged in a soul-kiss) . . . and eight or ten sample packages of Keflex. Eddie knew what Keflex was. Junkies, prone as they were to infections both general and local, usually knew.

Keflex was an antibiotic.

"Oh, I got plenty of those already," Balazar was saying. He sounded harried.

"What's this new one, 'Cimi?"

If this doesn't knock out whatever's wrong with him nothing will, Eddie thought.

He began to grab the packages and went to stuff them into his pockets. He realized he had no pockets and uttered a harsh bark that wasn't even close to laughter.

He began to dump them into the sink. He would have to pick them up later ... if there was a later.

"Well," 'Cimi was saying, "you see—"

"Will you hurry the fuck up?" Balazar yelled.

"It's the kid's big brother," 'Cimi said, and Eddie froze with the last two packages of Keflex still in his hand, his head cocked. He looked more like the dog on the old RCA Victor records than ever.

"What about him?" Balazar asked impatiently.

"He's dead," 'Cimi said.

Eddie dropped the Keflex into the sink and turned toward Roland.

"They killed my brother," he said.

20

Balazar opened his mouth to tell 'Cimi not to bother him with a bunch of crap when he had important things to worry about—like this impossible-to-shake feeling that the kid was going to fuck him, Andolini or no Andolini—when he heard the kid as clearly as the kid had no doubt heard him and 'Cimi. "They killed my brother," the kid said.

Suddenly Balazar didn't care about his goods, about the unanswered questions, or anything except bringing this situa-tion to a screeching halt before it could get any weirder.

"Kill him, Jack!" he shouted.

There was no response. Then he heard the kid say it again: "They killed my brother. They killed Henry."

Balazar suddenly knew—knew—it wasn't Jack the kid was talking to.

"Get all the gentlemen," he said to 'Cimi. "All of them. We're gonna burn his ass and when he's dead we're gonna take him in the kitchen and I'm gonna personally chop his head off."

21

"They killed my brother," the prisoner said. The gunslinger said nothing. He only watched and thought: The bottles. In the sink. That's what I need, or what he thinks I need. The packets. Don't forget. Don't forget.

From the other room: "Kill him, Jack!"

Neither Eddie nor the gunslinger took any notice of this.

"They killed my brother. They killed Henry."

In the other room Balazar was now talking about taking Eddie's head as a trophy. The gunslinger found some odd comfort in this: not everything in this world was different from his own, it seemed.

The one called 'Cimi began shouting hoarsely for the others. There was an ungentlemanly thunder of running feet.

"Do you want to do something about it, or do you just want to stand here?"

Roland asked.

"Oh, I want to do something about it," Eddie said, and raised the gunslinger's revolver. Although only moments ago he had believed he would need both hands to do it, he found that he could do it easily.

"And what is it you want to do?" Roland asked, and his voice seemed distant to

his own ears. He was sick, full of fever, but what was happening to him now was the onset of a different fever, one which was all too familiar. It was the fever that had overtaken him in Tull. It was battle-fire, hazing all thought, leaving only the need to stop thinking and start shooting.

"I want to go to war," Eddie Dean said calmly.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Roland said, "but you are going to find out. When we go through the door, you go right. I have to go left. My hand." Eddie nodded. They went to their war.

22

Balazar had expected Eddie, or Andolini, or both of them. He had not expected Eddie and an utter stranger, a tall man with dirty gray-black hair and a face that looked as if it had been chiseled from obdurate stone by some savage god. For a moment he was not sure which way to fire.

'Cimi, however, had no such problems. Da Boss was mad at Eddie. Therefore, he would punch Eddie's clock first and worry about the other catzarro later. 'Cimi turned ponderously toward Eddie and pulled the trigger of his automatic three times. The casings jumped and gleamed in the air. Eddie saw the big man turning and went into a mad slide along the floor, whizzing along like some kid in a disco contest, a kid so jived-up he didn't realize he'd left his entire John Travolta outfit, underwear included, behind; he went with his wang wagging and his bare knees first heating and then scorching as the friction built up. Holes punched through plastic that was supposed to look like knotty pine just above him. Slivers of it rained down on his shoulders and into his hair.

Don't let me die naked and needing a fix, God, he prayed, knowing such a prayer was more than blasphemous; it was an absurdity. Still he was unable to stop it.

/// die, but please, just let me have one more—

The revolver in the gunslinger's left hand crashed. On the open beach it had been loud; over here it was deafening.

"Oh Jeez!" 'Cimi Dretto screamed in a strangled, breathy voice. It was a wonder he could scream at all. His chest sud-denly caved in, as if someone had swung a sledgehammer at a barrel. His white shirt began to turn red in patches, as if poppies were blooming on it. "Oh Jeez! Oh Jeez! Oh J—"

Claudio Andolini shoved him aside. 'Cimi fell with a thud. Two of the framed pictures on Balazar's wall crashed down. The one showing Da Boss presenting the Sportsman of the Year trophy to a grinning kid at a Police Athletic League banquet landed on 'Cimi's head. Shattered glass fell on his shoulders.

"oh jeez" he whispered in a fainting little voice, and blood began to bubble from his lips.

Claudio was followed by Tricks and one of the men who had been waiting in the storage room. Claudio had an auto-matic in each hand; the guy from the storage room had a Remington shotgun sawed off so short that it looked like a derringer with a case of the mumps; Tricks Postino was carry-ing what he called The Wonderful Rambo Machine—this was an M-16 rapid-fire assault weapon.

"Where's my brother, you fucking needle-freak?" Claudio screamed. "What'd you do to Jack?" He could not have been terribly interested in an answer, because he began to fire with both weapons while he was still yelling. I'm dead, Eddie thought, and then Roland fired again. Claudio Andolini was propelled backwards in a cloud of his own blood. The auto-matics flew from his hands and slid across

Balazar's desk. They thumped to the carpet amid a flutter of playing cards. Most of Claudio's guts hit the wall a second before Claudio caught up with them.

"Get him!" Balazar was shrieking. "Get the spook! The kid ain't dangerous! He's nothing but a bare-ass junkie! Get the spook! Blow him away!"

He pulled the trigger on the .357 twice. The Magnum was almost as loud as Roland's revolver. It did not make neat holes in the wall against which Roland crouched; the slugs smashed gaping wounds in the fake wood to either side of Roland's head. White light from the bathroom shone through the holes in ragged rays.

Roland pulled the trigger of his revolver.

Only a dry click.

Misfire.

"Eddie!" the gunslinger yelled, and Eddie raised his own gun and pulled the trigger.

The crash was so loud that for a moment he thought the gun had blown up in his hand, as Jack's had done. The recoil did not drive him back through the wall, but it did snap his arm up in a savage arc that jerked all the tendons under his arm.

He saw part of Balazar's shoulder disintegrate into red spray, heard Balazar screech like a wounded cat, and yelled, "The junkie ain't dangerous, was that what you said? Was that it, you numb fuck? You want to mess with me and my brother? I'll show you who's dangerous! I'll sh—"

There was a boom like a grenade as the guy from the storage room fired the sawed-off. Eddie rolled as the blast tore a hundred tiny holes in the walls and bathroom door. His naked skin was seared by shot in several places, and Eddie understood that if the guy had been closer, where the thing's pattern was tight, he would have been vaporized.

Hell, I'm dead anyway, he thought, watching as the guy from the storage room worked the Remington's jack, pump-ing in fresh cartridges, then laying it over his forearm. He was grinning. His teeth were very yellow—Eddie didn't think they had been acquainted with a toothbrush in quite some time.

Christ, I'm going to get killed by some fuckhead with yellow teeth and I don't even know his name, Eddie thought dimly. At least I put one in Balazar. At least I did that much. He wondered if Roland had another shot. He couldn't remember.

"I got him!" Tricks Postino yelled cheerfully. "Gimme a clear field, Dario!" And before the man named Dario could give him a clear field or anything else, Tricks opened up with The Wonderful Rambo Machine. The heavy thunder of machine-gun fire filled Balazar's office. The first result of this barrage was to save Eddie Dean's life. Dario had drawn a bead on him with the sawed-off, but before he could pull its double triggers, Tricks cut him in half.

"Stop it, you idiot!" Balazar screamed.

But Tricks either didn't hear, couldn't stop, or wouldn't stop. Lips pulled back from his teeth so that his spit-shining teeth were bared in a huge shark's grin, he raked the room from one end to the other, blowing two of the wall panels to dust, turning framed photographs into clouds of flying glass fragments, hammering the bathroom door off its hinges. The frosted glass of Balazar's shower stall exploded. The March of Dimes trophy Balazar had gotten the year before bonged like a bell as a slug drove through it.

In the movies, people actually kill other people with hand-held rapid-fire

weapons. In real life, this rarely happens. If it does, it happens with the first four or five slugs fired (as the unfortunate Dario could have testified, if he had ever been capable of testifying to anything again). After the first four or five, two things happen to a man—even a powerful one— trying to control such a weapon. The muzzle begins to rise, and the shooter himself begins to turn either right or left, depending on which unfortunate shoulder he has decided to bludgeon with the weapon's recoil. In short, only a moron or a movie star would attempt the use of such a gun; it was like trying to shoot someone with a pneumatic drill.

For a moment Eddie was incapable of any action more constructive than staring at this perfect marvel of idiocy. Then he saw other men crowding through the door behind Tricks, and raised Roland's revolver.

"Got him!" Tricks was screaming with the joyous hysteria of a man who has seen too many movies to be able to distinguish between what the script in his head says should be happening and what really is. "Got him! I got him! I g—"

Eddie pulled the trigger and vaporized Tricks from the eyebrows up. Judging from the man's behavior, that was not a great deal.

Jesus Christ, when these things do shoot, they really blow holes in things, he thought.

There was a loud KA-BLAM from Eddie's left. Something tore a hot gouge in his underdeveloped left bicep. He saw Balazar pointing the Mag at him from behind the corner of his card-littered desk. His shoulder was a dripping red mass.

Eddie ducked as the Magnum crashed again.

23

Roland managed to get into a crouch, aimed at the first of the new men coming in through the door, and squeezed the trigger. He had rolled the cylinder, dumped the used loads and the duds onto the carpet, and had loaded this one fresh shell. He had done it with his teeth. Balazar had pinned Eddie down; If this one's a dud, I think we're both gone.

It wasn't. The gun roared, recoiled in his hand, and Jimmy Haspio spun aside, the .45 he had been holding falling from his dying fingers.

Roland saw the other man duck back and then he was crawling through the splinters of wood and glass that littered the floor. He dropped his revolver back into its holster. The idea of reloading again with two of his right fingers missing was a joke.

Eddie was doing well. The gunslinger measured just how well by the fact that he was fighting naked. That was hard for a man. Sometimes impossible.

The gunslinger grabbed one of the automatic pistols Claudio Andolini had dropped.

"What are the rest of you guys waiting for?" Balazar screamed. "Jesus! Eat these guys!"

Big George Biondi and the other man from the supply room charged in through the door. The man from the supply room was bawling something in Italian.

Roland crawled to the corner of the desk. Eddie rose, aiming toward the door and the charging men. He knows Balazar's there, waiting, but he thinks he's the only one of us with a gun now, Roland thought. Here is another one ready to die for you, Roland. What great wrong did you ever do that you should inspire such terrible loyalty in so many?

Balazar rose, not seeing the gunslinger was now on his flank. Balazar was thinking of only one thing: finally putting an end to the goddam junkie who had brought this ruin down on his head.

"No," the gunslinger said, and Balazar looked around at him, surprise stamped on his features.

"Fuck y—" Balazar began, bringing the Magnum around. The gunslinger shot him four times with Claudio's automatic. It was a cheap little thing, not much better than a toy, and touching it made his hand feel dirty, but it was perhaps fitting to kill a despicable man with a despicable weapon.

Enrico Balazar died with an expression of terminal surprise on what remained of his face.

"Hi, George!" Eddie said, and pulled the trigger of the gunslinger's revolver. That satisfying crash came again. No duds in this baby, Eddie thought crazily. I guess I must have gotten the good one. George got off one shot before Eddie's bullet drove him back into the screaming man, bowling him over like a ninepin, but it went wild. An irrational but utterly persuasive feeling had come over him: a feeling that Roland's gun held some magical, talismanic power of protection. As long as he held it, he couldn't be hurt.

Silence fell then, a silence in which Eddie could hear only the man under Big George moaning (when George landed on Rudy Vechhio, which was this unfortunate fellow's name, he had fractured three of Vechhio's ribs) and the high ringing in his own ears. He wondered if he would ever hear right again. The shooting spree which now seemed to be over made the loudest rock concert Eddie had ever been to sound like a radio playing two blocks over by comparison.

Balazar's office was no longer recognizable as a room of any kind. Its previous function had ceased to matter. Eddie looked around with the wide, wondering eyes of a very young man seeing something like this for the first time, but Roland knew the look, and the look was always the same. Whether it was an open field of battle where thousands had died by cannon, rifle, sword, and halberd or a small room where five or six had shot each other, it was the same place, always the same place in the end: another deadhouse, stinking of gunpowder and raw meat. The wall between the bathroom and the office was gone except for a few struts. Broken glass twinkled everywhere. Ceiling panels that had been shredded by Tricks Postino's gaudy but useless M-16 fireworks display hung down like pieces of peeled skin.

Eddie coughed dryly. Now he could hear other sounds—a babble of excited conversation, shouted voices outside the bar, and, in the distance, the warble of sirens.

"How many?" the gunslinger asked Eddie. "Can we have gotten all of them?"

"Yes, I think—"

"I got something for you, Eddie," Kevin Blake said from the hallway. "I thought you might want it, like for a souvenir, you know?" What Balazar had not been able to do to the younger Dean brother Kevin had done to the elder. He lobbed Henry Dean's severed head through the doorway.

Eddie saw what it was and screamed. He ran toward the door, heedless of the splinters of glass and wood that punched into his bare feet, screaming, shooting, firing the last live shell in the big revolver as he went.

"No, Eddie!" Roland screamed, but Eddie didn't hear. He was beyond hearing. He hit a dud in the sixth chamber, but by then he was aware of nothing but the fact that Henry was dead, Henry, they had cut off his head, some miserable son

of a bitch had cut off Henry's head, and that son of a bitch was going to pay, oh yes, you could count on that.

So he ran toward the door, pulling the trigger again and again, unaware that nothing was happening, unaware that his feet were red with blood, and Kevin Blake stepped into the doorway to meet him, crouched low, a Llama .38 automatic in his hand. Kevin's red hair stood around his head in coils and springs, and Kevin was smiling.

24

He'll be low, the gunslinger thought, knowing he could have to be lucky to hit his target with this untrustworthy little toy even if he had guessed right.

When he saw the ruse of Balazar's soldier was going to draw Eddie out, Roland rose to his knees and steadied his left hand on his right fist, grimly ignoring the screech of pain making that fist caused. He would have one chance only. The pain didn't matter.

Then the man with the red hair stepped into the doorway, smiling, and as always Roland's brain was gone; his eye saw, his hand shot, and suddenly the red-head was lying against the wall of the corridor with his eyes open and a small blue hole in his forehead. Eddie was standing over him, screaming and sobbing, dry-firing the big revolver with the sandalwood grips again and again, as if the man with the red hair could never be dead enough.

The gunslinger waited for the deadly crossfire that would cut Eddie in half and when it didn't come he knew it was truly over. If there had been other soldiers, they had taken to their heels.

He got wearily to his feet, reeled, and then walked slowly over to where Eddie Dean stood.

"Stop it," he said.

Eddie ignored him and went on dry-firing Roland's big gun at the dead man.

"Stop it, Eddie, he's dead. They're all dead. Your feet are bleeding."

Eddie ignored him and went on pulling the revolver's trigger. The babble of excited voices outside was closer. So were the sirens.

The gunslinger reached for the gun and pulled on it. Eddie turned on him, and before Roland was entirely sure what was happening, Eddie struck him on the side of the head with his own gun. Roland felt a warm gush of blood and collapsed against the wall. He struggled to stay on his feet—they had to get out of here, quick. But he could feel himself sliding down the wall in spite of his every effort, and then the world was gone for a little while in a drift of grayness.

25

He was out for no more than two minutes, and then he managed to get things back into focus and make it to his feet. Eddie was no longer in the hallway. Roland's gun lay on the chest of the dead man with the red hair. The gunslinger bent, fighting off a wave of dizziness, picked it up, and dropped it into its holster with an awkward, cross-body movement.

I want my damned fingers back, he thought tiredly, and sighed.

He tried to walk back into the ruins of the office, but the best he could manage was an educated stagger. He stopped, bent, and picked up all of Eddie's clothes that he could hold in the crook of his left arm. The howlers had almost arrived.



Roland believed the men winding them were probably militia, a Marshall's posse, something of that sort . . . but there was always the possibility they might be more of Balazar's men.

"Eddie," he croaked. His throat was sore and throbbing again, worse even than the swollen place on the side of his head where Eddie had struck him with the revolver.

Eddie didn't notice. Eddie was sitting on the floor with his brother's head cradled against his belly. He was shuddering all over and crying. The gunslinger looked for the door, didn't see it, and felt a nasty jolt that was nearly terror. Then he remembered. With both of them on this side, the only way to create the door was for him to make physical contact with Eddie.

He reached for him but Eddie shrank away, still weeping. "Don't touch me," he said.

"Eddie, it's over. They're all dead, and your brother's dead, too."

"Leave my brother out of this!" Eddie shrieked childishly, and another fit of shuddering went through him. He cradled the severed head to his chest and rocked it. He lifted his streaming eyes to the gunslinger's face.

"All the times he took care of me, man," he said, sobbing so hard the gunslinger could barely understand him. "All the times. Why couldn't I have taken care of him, just this once, after all the times he took care of me?"

He took care of you, all right, Roland thought grimly. Look at you, sitting there and shaking like a man who's eaten an apple from the fever tree. He took care of you just fine.

"We have to go."

"Go?" for the first time some vague understanding came into Eddie's face, and it was followed immediately by alarm. "I ain't going nowhere. Especially not back to that other place, where those big crabs or whatever they are ate Jack."

Someone was hammering on the door, yelling to open up.

"Do you want to stay here and explain all these bodies?" the gunslinger asked.

"I don't care," Eddie said. "Without Henry, it doesn't matter. Nothing does."

"Maybe it doesn't matter to you," Roland said, "but there are others involved, prisoner."

"Don't call me that!" Eddie shouted.

"I'll call you that until you show me you can walk out of the cell you're in!"

Roland shouted back. It hurt his throat to yell, but he yelled just the same.

"Throw that rotten piece of meat away and stop puling!"

Eddie looked at him, cheeks wet, eyes wide and frightened.

"THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE!" an amplified voice said from outside. To Eddie the voice sounded eerily like the voice of a game-show host. "THE S.W.A.T. SQUAD HAS ARRIVED—I REPEAT: THE S.W.A.T. SQUAD HAS ARRIVED!"

"What's on the other side of that door for me?" Eddie asked the gunslinger quietly. "Go on and tell me. If you can tell me, maybe I'll come. But if you lie, I'll know."

"Probably death," the gunslinger said. "But before that happens, I don't think you'll be bored. I want you to join me on a quest. Of course, all will probably end in death—death for the four of us in a strange place. But if we should win through ..." His eyes gleamed. "If we win through, Eddie, you'll see something beyond all the beliefs of all your dreams."

"What thing?"

"The Dark Tower."

"Where is this Tower?"

"Far from the beach where you found me. How far I know not."

"What is it?"

"I don't know that, either—except that it may be a kind of ... of a bolt. A central linchpin that holds all of existence together. All existence, all time, and all size."

"You said four. Who are the other two?"

"I know them not, for they have yet to be drawn."

"As I was drawn. Or as you'd like to draw me."

"Yes."

From outside there was a coughing explosion like a mor-tar round. The glass of The Leaning Tower's front window blew in. The barroom began to fill with choking clouds of tear-gas.

"Well?" Roland asked. He could grab Eddie, force the doorway into existence by their contact, and pummel them both through. But he had seen Eddie risk his life for him; he had seen this hag-ridden man behave with all the dignity of a born gunslinger in spite of his addiction and the fact that he had been forced to fight as naked as the day he was born, and he wanted Eddie to decide for himself.

"Quests, adventures, Towers, worlds to win," Eddie said, and smiled wanly. Neither of them turned as fresh tear-gas rounds flew through the windows to explode, hissing, on the floor. The first acrid tendrils of the gas were now slipping into Balazar's office. "Sounds better than one of those Edgar Rice Burroughs books about Mars Henry used to read me some-times when we were kids. You only left out one thing."

"What's that?"

"The beautiful bare-breasted girls."

The gunslinger smiled. "On the way to the Dark Tower," he said, "anything is possible."

Another shudder wracked Eddie's body. He raised Henry's head, kissed one cool, ash-colored cheek, and laid the gore-streaked relic gently aside. He got to his feet.

"Okay," he said. "I didn't have any thing else planned for tonight, anyway."

"Take these," Roland said, and shoved the clothes at him. "Put on your shoes if nothing else. You've cut your feet."

On the sidewalk outside, two cops wearing Plexiglas faceplates, flak jackets, and Kevlar vests smashed in The Lean-ing Tower's front door. In the bathroom, Eddie (dressed in his underpants, his Adidas sneakers, and nothing else) handed the sample packages of Keflex to Roland one by one, and Roland put them into the pockets of Eddie's jeans. When they were all safely stowed, Roland slid his right arm around Eddie's neck again and Eddie gripped Roland's left hand again. The door was suddenly there, a rectangle of darkness. Eddie felt the wind from that other world blow his sweaty hair back from his forehead. He heard the waves rolling up that stony beach. He smelled the tang of sour sea-salt. And in spite of everything, all his pain and sorrow, he suddenly wanted to see this Tower of which Roland spoke. He wanted to see it very much. And with Henry dead, what was there in this world for him? Their parents were dead, and there hadn't been a steady girl since he got heavily into the smack three years ago—just a steady parade of sluts, needlers, and nosers. None of them straight. Fuck that action. They stepped through, Eddie actually leading a little.

On the other side he was suddenly wracked with fresh shudders and agonizing muscle-cramps—the first symptoms of serious heroin withdrawal. And with them he also had the first alarmed second thoughts.

"Wait!" he shouted. "I want to go back for a minute! His desk! His desk, or the other office! The skag! If they were keeping Henry doped, there's gotta be junk! Heroin! I need it! I need it!"

He looked pleadingly at Roland, but the gunslinger's face was stony.

"That part of your life is over, Eddie," he said. He reached out with his left hand.

"No!" Eddie screamed, clawing at him. "Wo, you don't get it, man, I need it! I NEED IT!"

He might as well have been clawing stone.

The gunslinger swept the door shut.

It made a dull clapping sound that bespoke utter finality and fell backward onto the sand. A little dust puffed up from its edges. There was nothing behind the door, and now no word written upon it. This particular portal between the worlds had closed forever.

"NO!" Eddie screamed, and the gulls screamed back at him as if in jeering contempt; the lobstrosities asked him questions, perhaps suggesting he could hear them a little better if he were to come a little closer, and Eddie fell over on his side, crying and shuddering and jerking with cramps.

"Your need will pass," the gunslinger said, and managed to get one of the sample packets out of the pocket of Eddie's jeans, which were so like his own. Again, he could read some of these letters but not all. Cheeflet, the word looked like. Cheeflet.

Medicine from that other world.

"Kill or cure," Roland murmured, and dry-swallowed two of the capsules. Then he took the other three astin, and lay next to Eddie, and took him in his arms as well as he could, and after some difficult time, both of them slept.

shuffle

The time following that night was broken time for Roland, time that didn't really exist as time at all. What he remembered was only a series of images, moments, conversa-tion without context; images flashing past like one-eyed jacks and treys and nines and the Bloody Black Bitch Queen of Spiders in a card-sharp's rapid shuffle.

Later on he asked Eddie how long that time lasted, but Eddie didn't know either. Time had been destroyed for both of them. There is no time in hell, and each of them was in his own private hell: Roland the hell of the fever and infection, Eddie the hell of withdrawal.

"It was less than a week," Eddie said. "That's all I know for sure."

"How do you know that?"

"A week's worth of pills was all I had to give you. After that, you were gonna have to do the one thing or the other on your own."

"Get well or die."

"Right."

shuffle

There's a gunshot as twilight draws down to dark, a dry crack impinging on the inevitable and ineluctable sound of the breakers dying on the desolate beach: KA-BLAM! He smells a whiff of gunpowder. Trouble, the gunslinger thinks weakly, and gropes for revolvers that aren't there. Oh no, it's the end, it's . . .

But there's no more, as something starts to smell

shuffle

good in the dark. Something, after all this long dark dry time, something is cooking. It's not just the smell. He can hear the snap and pop of twigs, can see the faint orange flicker of a campfire. Sometimes, when the sea-breeze gusts, he smells fragrant smoke as well as that mouth-watering other smell. Food, he thinks. My God, am I hungry? If I'm hungry, maybe I'm getting well.

Eddie, he tries to say, but his voice is all gone. His throat hurts, hurts so bad. We should have brought some astin, too, he thinks, and then tries to laugh: all the drugs for him, none for Eddie.

Eddie appears. He's got a tin plate, one the gunslinger would know anywhere: it came, after all, from his own purse. On it are steaming chunks of whitish-pink meat.

What? he tries to ask, and nothing comes out but a squeaky little farting sound. Eddie reads the shape of his lips. "I don't know," he says crossly. "All I know is it didn't kill me. Eat it, damn you."

He sees Eddie is very pale, Eddie is shaking, and he smells something coming from Eddie that is either shit or death, and he knows Eddie is in a bad way. He reaches out a groping hand, wanting to give comfort. Eddie strikes it away.

"I'll feed you," he says crossly. "Fucked if I know why. I ought to kill you. I would, if I didn't think that if you could get through into my world once, maybe you could do it again."

Eddie looks around.

"And if it wasn't that I'd be alone. Except for them."

He looks back at Roland and a fit of shuddering runs through him—it is so fierce that he almost spills the chunks of meat on the tin plate. At last it passes.

"Eat, God damn you."

The gunslinger eats. The meat is more than not bad; the meat is delicious. He manages three pieces and then every-thing blurs into a new

shuffle

effort to speak, but all he can do is whisper. The cup of Eddie's ear is pressed against his lips, except every now and then it shudders away as Eddie goes through one of his spasms. He says it again. "North. Up ... up the beach."

"How do you know?"

"Just know," he whispers.

Eddie looks at him. "You're crazy," he says.

The gunslinger smiles and tries to black out but Eddie slaps him, slaps him hard. Roland's blue eyes fly open and for a moment they are so alive and electric Eddie looks uneasy. Then his lips draw back in a smile that is mostly snarl.

"Yeah, you can drone off," he said, "but first you gotta take your dope. It's time. Sun says it is, anyway. I guess. I was never no Boy Scout, so I don't know for sure. But I guess it's close enough for Government work. Open wide, Roland.

Open wide for Dr. Eddie, you kidnapping fuck."

The gunslinger opens his mouth like a baby for the breast. Eddie puts two of the pills in his mouth and then slops fresh water carelessly into Roland's mouth.

Roland guesses it must be from a hill stream somewhere to the east. It might be poison; Eddie wouldn't know fair water from foul. On the other hand, Eddie seems fine himself, and there's really no choice, is there? No.

He swallows, coughs, and nearly strangles while Eddie looks at him indifferently.

Roland reaches for him.

Eddie tries to draw away.

The gunslinger's bullshooter eyes command him.

Roland draws him close, so close he can smell the stink of Eddie's sickness and Eddie can smell the stink of his; the combination sickens and compels them both.

"Only two choices here," Roland whispers. "Don't know how it is in your world, but only two choices here. Stand and maybe live, or die on your knees with your head down and the stink of your own armpits in your nose. Nothing..." He hacks out a cough. "Nothing to me."

"Who are you?" Eddie screams at him.

"Your destiny, Eddie," the gunslinger whispers.

"Why don't you just eat shit and die?" Eddie asks him. The gunslinger tries to speak, but before he can he floats off as the cards shuffle

KA-BLAM!

Roland opens his eyes on a billion stars wheeling through the blackness, then closes them again.

He doesn't know what's going on but he thinks every-thing's okay. The deck's still moving, the cards still shuffle

More of the sweet, tasty chunks of meat. He feels better. Eddie looks better, too. But he also looks worried.

"They're getting closer," he says. "They may be ugly, but they ain't completely stupid. They know what I been doing. Somehow they know, and they don't dig it. Every night they get a little closer. It might be smart to move on when daybreak comes, if you can. Or it might be the last daybreak we ever see."

"What?" This is not exactly a whisper but a husk some-where between a whisper and real speech.

"Them," Eddie says, and gestures toward the beach. "Dad-a-chack, dum-a-chum, and all that shit. I think they're like us, Roland—all for eating, but not too big on getting eaten."

Suddenly, in an utter blast of horror, Roland realizes what the whitish-pink chunks of meat Eddie has been feeding him have been. He cannot speak; revulsion robs him of what little voice he has managed to get back. But Eddie sees everything he wants to say on his face.

"What did you think I was doing?" he nearly snarls. "Calling Red Lobster for take-out?"

"They're poison," Roland whispers. "That's why—"

"Yeah, that's why you're hors de combat. What I'm trying to keep from you being, Roland my friend, is h'ors d'œuvres as well. As far as poison goes, rattlesnakes are poison, but people eat them. Rattlesnake tastes real good. Like chicken. I read that somewhere. They looked like lobsters to me, so I decided to

take a chance. What else were we gonna eat? Dirt? I shot one of the fuckers and cooked the living Christ out of it. There wasn't anything else. And actually, they taste pretty good. I been shooting one a night just after the sun starts to go down. They're not real lively until it gets completely dark. I never saw you turning the stuff down."

Eddie smiles.

"I like to think maybe I got one of the ones that ate Jack. I like to think I'm eating that dink. It, like, eases my mind, you know?"

"One of them ate part of me, too," the gunslinger husks out. "Two fingers, one toe."

"That's also cool," Eddie keeps smiling. His face is pal-lid, sharklike . . . but some of that ill look has gone now, and the smell of shit and death which has hung around him like a shroud seems to be going away.

"Fuck yourself," the gunslinger husks.

"Roland shows a flash of spirit!" Eddie cries. "Maybe you ain't gonna die after all! Dahling! I think that's mahvellous!"

"Live," Roland says. The husk has become a whisper again. The fishhooks are returning to his throat.

"Yeah?" Eddie looks at him, then nods and answers his own question. "Yeah. I think you mean to. Once I thought you were going and once I thought you were gone. Now it looks like you're going to get better. The antibiotics are helping, I guess, but mostly I think you're hauling yourself up. What for? Why the fuck do you keep trying so hard to keep alive on this scuzzy beach?"

Tower, he mouths, because now he can't even manage a husk.

"You and your fucking Tower," Eddie says, starts to turn away, and then turns back, surprised, as Roland's hand clamps on his arm like a manacle.

They look into each others' eyes and Eddie says, "All right. All right!"

North, the gunslinger mouths. North, I told you. Has he told him that? He thinks so, but it's lost. Lost in the shuffle.

"How do you know?" Eddie screams at him in sudden frustration. He raises his fists as if to strike Roland, then lowers them.

I just know—so why do you waste my time and energy asking me foolish questions? he wants to reply, but before he can, the cards shuffle

being dragged along, bounced and bumped, his head lolling helplessly from one side to the other, bound to some kind of a weird travois by his own gunbelts, and he can hear Eddie Dean singing a song which is so weirdly familiar he at first believes this must be a delirium dream:

"Heyy Jude . . . don't make it bad . . . take a saaad song . . . and make it better . . ."

Where did you hear that? he wants to ask. Did you hear me singing it, Eddie? And where are we?

But before he can ask anything shuffle

Cort would bash the kid's head in if he saw that contrap-tion, Roland thinks, looking at the travois upon which he has spent the day, and laughs. It isn't much of a laugh. It sounds like one of those waves dropping its load of stones on the beach. He doesn't know how far they have come, but it's far enough for Eddie to be totally bushed. He's sitting on a rock in the lengthening light with one of the gunslinger's revolvers in his lap and a half-full water-skin to one

side. There's a small bulge in his shirt pocket. These are the bullets from the back of the gunbelts—the diminishing supply of "good" bullets. Eddie has tied these up in a piece of his own shirt. The main reason the supply of "good" bullets is diminishing so fast is because one of every four or five has also turned out to be a dud.

Eddie, who has been nearly dozing, now looks up. "What are you laughing about?" he asks.

The gunslinger waves a dismissive hand and shakes his head. Because he's wrong, he realizes. Cort wouldn't bash Eddie for the travois, even though it was an odd, lame-looking thing. Roland thinks it might even be possible that Cort might grunt some word of compliment—such a rarity that the boy to whom it happened hardly ever knew how to respond; he was left gaping like a fish just pulled from a cook's barrel.

The main supports were two cottonwood branches of approximately the same length and thickness. A blowdown, the gunslinger presumed. He had used smaller branches as supports, attaching them to the support poles with a crazy conglomeration of stuff: gunbelts, the glue-string that had held the devil-powder to his chest, even the rawhide thong from the gunslinger's hat and his, Eddie's, own sneaker laces. He had laid the gunslinger's bedroll over the supports.

Cort would not have struck him because, sick as he was, Eddie had at least done more than squat on his hunkers and bewail his fate. He had made something. Had tried.

And Cort might have offered one of his abrupt, almost grudging compliments because, crazy as the thing looked, it worked. The long tracks stretching back down the beach to a point where they seemed to come together at the rim of perspective proved that.

"You see any of them?" Eddie asks. The sun is going down, beating an orange path across the water, and so the gunslinger reckons he has been out better than six hours this time. He feels stronger. He sits up and looks down to the water.

Neither the beach nor the land sweeping to the western slope of the mountains have changed much; he can see small variations of landscape and detritus (a dead seagull, for instance, lying in a little heap of blowing feathers on the sand about twenty yards to the left and thirty or so closer to the water), but these aside, they might as well be right where they started.

"No," the gunslinger says. Then: "Yes. There's one."

He points. Eddie squints, then nods. As the sun sinks lower and the orange track begins to look more and more like blood, the first of the lobstrosities come tumbling out of the waves and begin crawling up the beach.

Two of them race clumsily toward the dead gull. The winner pounces on it, rips it open, and begins to stuff the rotting remains into its maw. "Did-a-chick?" it asks.

"Dum-a-chum?" responds the loser. "Dod-a—"

KA-BLAM!

Roland's gun puts an end to the second creature's questions. Eddie walks down to it and grabs it by the back, keeping a wary eye on its fellow as he does so.

The other offers no trouble, however; it is busy with the gull. Eddie brings his kill back. It is still twitching, raising and lowering its claws, but soon enough it stops moving. The tail arches one final time, then simply drops instead of flexing downward. The boxers' claws hang limp.

"Dinnah will soon be served, mawster," Eddie says. "You have your choice: filet

of creepy-crawler or filet of creepy-crawler. Which strikes your fancy, mawster?"

"I don't understand you," the gunslinger said.

"Sure you do," Eddie said. "You just don't have any sense of humor. What happened to it?"

"Shot off in one war or another, I guess."

Eddie smiles at that. "You look and sound a little more alive tonight, Roland."

"I am, I think."

"Well, maybe you could even walk for awhile tomorrow. I'll tell you very frankly, my friend, dragging you is the pits and the shits."

"I'll try."

"You do that."

"You look a little better, too," Roland ventures. His voice cracks on the last two words like the voice of a young boy. If don't stop talking soon, he thought, I won't be able to talk at all again.

"I guess I'll live." He looks at Roland expressionlessly. "You'll never know how close it was a couple of times, though. Once I took one of your guns and put it against my head. Cocked it, held it there for awhile, and then took it away.

Eased the hammer down and shoved it back in your holster. Another night I had a convulsion. I think that was the second night, but I'm not sure." He shakes his head and says some-thing the gunslinger both does and doesn't understand.

"Michigan seems like a dream to me now."

Although his voice is down to that husky murmur again and he knows he shouldn't be talking at all, the gunslinger has to know one thing. "What stopped you from pulling the trigger?"

"Well, this is the only pair of pants I've got," Eddie says. "At the last second I thought that if I pulled the trigger and it was one of those dud shells, I'd never get up the guts to do it again . . . and once you shit your pants, you gotta wash 'em right away or live with the stink forever. Henry told me that. He said he learned it in Nam. And since it was nighttime and Lester the Lobster was out, not to mention all his friends—"

But the gunslinger is laughing, laughing hard, although only an occasional cracked sound actually escapes his lips. Smiling a little himself, Eddie says:

"I think maybe you only got your sense of humor shot off up to the elbow in that war." He gets up, meaning to go up the slope to where there will be fuel for a fire, Roland supposes.

"Wait," he whispers, and Eddie looks at him. "Why, really?"

"I guess because you needed me. If I'd killed myself, you would have died. Later on, after you're really on your feet again, I may, like, re-examine my options."

He looks around and sighs deeply.

"There may be a Disney land or Coney Island somewhere in your world, Roland, but what I've seen of it so far really doesn't interest me much."

He starts away, pauses, and looks back again at Roland. His face is somber, although some of the sickly pallor has left it. The shakes have become no more than occasional tremors.

"Sometimes you really don't understand me, do you?"

"No," the gunslinger whispers. "Sometimes I don't."

"Then I'll elucidate. There are people who need people to need them. The reason you don't understand is because you're not one of those people. You'd use me and then toss me away like a paper bag if that's what it came down to. God fucked



you, my friend. You're just smart enough so it would hurt you to do that, and just hard enough so you'd go ahead and do it anyway. You wouldn't be able to help yourself. If I was lying on the beach there and screaming for help, you'd walk over me if I was between you and your goddam Tower. Isn't that pretty close to the truth?"

Roland says nothing, only watches Eddie.

"But not everyone is like that. There are people who need people to need them. Like the Barbara Streisand song. Corny, but true. It's just another way of being hooked through the bag."

Eddie gazes at him.

"But when it comes to that, you're clean, aren't you?"

Roland watches him.

"Except for your Tower." Eddie utters a short laugh. "You're a Tower junkie, Roland."

"Which war was it?" Roland whispers.

"What?"

"The one where you got your sense of nobility and pur-*pose* shot off?"

Eddie recoils as if Roland has reached out and slapped him.

"I'm gonna go get some water," he says shortly. "Keep an eye on the creepy crawlers. We came a long way today, but I still don't know if they talk to each other or not."

He turns away then, but not before Roland has seen the last red rays of sunset reflected on his wet cheeks.

Roland turns back to the beach and watches. The lobstrosities crawl and question, question and crawl, but both activities seem aimless; they have some intelligence, but not enough to pass on information to others of their kind. God doesn't always dish it in your face, Roland thinks. Most times, but not always.

Eddie returns with wood.

"Well?" he asks. "What do you think?"

"We're all right," the gunslinger croaks, and Eddie starts to say something but the gunslinger is tired now and lies back and looks at the first stars peeking through the canopy of violet sky and shuffle

in the three days that followed, the gunslinger progressed steadily back to health. The red lines creeping up his arms first reversed their direction, then faded, then disappeared. On the next day he sometimes walked and sometimes let Eddie drag him. On the day following he didn't need to be dragged at all; every hour or two they simply sat for a period of time until the watery feeling went out of his legs. It was during these rests and in those times after dinner had been eaten but before the fire had burned all the way down and they went to sleep that the gunslinger heard about Henry and Eddie. He remembered wondering what had happened to make their brothering so difficult, but after Eddie had begun, haltingly and with that sort of resentful anger that proceeds from deep pain, the gun-slinger could have stopped him, could have told him: Don't bother, Eddie. I understand everything.

Except that wouldn't have helped Eddie. Eddie wasn't talking to help Henry because Henry was dead. He was talk-ing to bury Henry for good. And to remind himself that although Henry was dead, he, Eddie, wasn't.

So the gunslinger listened and said nothing.

The gist was simple: Eddie believed he had stolen his brother's life. Henry also believed this. Henry might have believed it on his own or he might have believed it because he so frequently heard their mother lecturing Eddie on how much both she and Henry had sacrificed for him, so Eddie could be as safe as anyone could be in this jungle of a city, so he could be happy, as happy as anyone could be in this jungle of a city, so he wouldn't end up like his poor sister that he didn't even hardly remember but she had been so beautiful, God love her. She was with the angels, and that was undoubtedly a wonderful place to be, but she didn't want Eddie to be with the angels just yet, run over in the road by some crazy drunken driver like his sister or cut up by some crazy junkie kid for the twenty-five cents in his pocket and left with his guts running out all over the sidewalk, and because she didn't think Eddie wanted to be with the angels yet, he just better listen to what his big brother said and do what his big brother said to do and always remember that Henry was making a love-sacrifice. Eddie told the gunslinger he doubted if his mother knew some of the things they had done—filching comic books from the candy store on Rincon Avenue or smoking cigarettes behind the Bonded Electroplate Factory on Cohoes Street. Once they saw a Chevrolet with the keys in it and although Henry barely knew how to drive—he was sixteen then, Eddie eight—he had crammed his brother into the car and said they were going to New York City. Eddie was scared, crying, Henry scared too and mad at Eddie, telling him to shut up, telling him to stop being such a fuckin baby, he had ten bucks and Eddie had three or four, they could go to the movies all fuckin day and then catch a Pelham train and be back before their mother had time to put supper on the table and wonder where they were. But Eddie kept crying and near the Queensboro Bridge they saw a police car on a side street and although Eddie was pretty sure the cop in it hadn't even been looking their way, he said Yeah when Henry asked him in a harsh, quavering voice if Eddie thought that bull had seen them. Henry turned white and pulled over so fast that he had almost amputated a fire hydrant. He was running down the block while Eddie, now in a panic himself, was still struggling with the unfamiliar doorhandle. Henry stopped, came back, and hauled Eddie out of the car. He also slapped him twice. Then they had walked—well, actually they slunk—all the way back to Brooklyn. It took them most of the day, and when their mother asked them why they looked so hot and sweaty and tired out, Henry said it was because he'd spent most of the day teaching Eddie how to go one-on-one on the basketball court at the playground around the block. Then some big kids came and they had to run. Their mother kissed Henry and beamed at Eddie. She asked him if he didn't have the bestest big brother in the world. Eddie agreed with her. This was honest agree-ment, too. He thought he did.

"He was as scared as I was that day," Eddie told Roland as they sat and watched the last of the day dwindle from the water, where soon the only light would be that reflected from the stars. "Scareder, really, because he thought that cop saw us and I knew he didn't. That's why he ran. But he came back. That's the important part. He came back."

Roland said nothing.

"You see that, don't you?" Eddie was looking at Roland with harsh, questioning eyes.

"I see."

"He was always scared, but he always came back."

Roland thought it would have been better for Eddie, maybe better for both of

them in the long run, if Henry had just kept showing his heels that day. . . or on one of the others. But people like Henry never did. People like Henry always came back, because people like Henry knew how to use trust. It was the only thing people like Henry did know how to use. First they changed trust into need, then they changed need into a drug, and once that was done, they—what was Eddie's word for it?—push. Yes. They pushed it.

"I think I'll turn in," the gunslinger said.

The next day Eddie went on, but Roland already knew it all. Henry hadn't played sports in high school because Henry couldn't stay after for practice. Henry had to take care of Eddie. The fact that Henry was scrawny and uncoordinated and didn't much care for sports in the first place had nothing to do with it, of course; Henry would have made a wonderful base-ball pitcher or one of those basketball jumpers, their mother assured them both time and again. Henry's grades were bad and he needed to repeat a number of subjects—but that wasn't because Henry was stupid; Eddie and Mrs. Dean both knew Henry was just as smart as lickety-split. But Henry had to spend the time he should have spent studying or doing home-work taking care of Eddie (the fact that this usually took place in the Dean living room, with both boys sprawled on the sofa watching TV or wrestling around on the floor somehow seemed not to matter). The bad grades meant Henry hadn't been able to be accepted into anything but NYU, and they couldn't afford it because the bad grades precluded any schol-arships, and then Henry got drafted and then it was Viet Nam, where Henry got most of his knee blown off, and the pain was bad, and the drug they gave him for it had a heavy morphine base, and when he was better they weaned him from the drug, only they didn't do such a good job because when Henry got back to New York there was still a monkey on his back, a hungry monkey waiting to be fed, and after a month or two he had gone out to see a man, and it had been about four months later, less than a month after their mother died, when Eddie first saw his brother snorting some white powder off a mirror. Eddie assumed it was coke. Turned out it was heroin. And if you traced it all the way back, whose fault was it?

Roland said nothing, but heard the voice of Cort in his mind: Fault always lies in the same place, my fine babies: with him weak enough to lay blame.

When he discovered the truth, Eddie had been shocked, then angry. Henry had responded not by promising to quit snorting but by telling Eddie he didn't blame him for being mad, he knew Nam had turned him into a worthless shitbag, he was weak, he would leave, that was the best thing, Eddie was right, the last thing he needed was a filthy junkie around, messing up the place. He just hoped Eddie wouldn't blame him too much. He had gotten weak, he admitted it; something in Nam had made him weak, had rotted him out the same way the moisture rotted the laces of your sneakers and the elastic of your underwear. There was also something in Nam that apparently rotted out your heart, Henry told him tearily. He just hoped that Eddie would remember all the years he had tried to be strong. For Eddie.

For Mom.

So Henry tried to leave. And Eddie, of course, couldn't let him. Eddie was consumed with guilt. Eddie had seen the scarred horror that had once been an unmarked leg, a knee that was now more Teflon than bone. They had a screaming match in the hall, Henry standing there in an old pair of khakis with his packed duffle bag in one hand and purple rings under his eyes, Eddie wearing nothing but a pair of yellowing jockey shorts, Henry saying you don't need me around,

Eddie, I'm poison to you and I know it, and Eddie yelling back You ain't going nowhere, get your ass back inside, and that's how it went until Mrs. McGursky came out of her place and yelled Go or stay, it's nothing to me, but you better decide one way or the other pretty quick or I'm calling the police. Mrs.

McGursky seemed about to add a few more admonishments, but just then she saw that Eddie was wearing nothing but a pair of skivvies. She added: And you're not decent, Eddie Dean! before pop-ping back inside. It was like watching a Jack-in-the-box in reverse. Eddie looked at Henry. Henry looked at Eddie. Look like Angel-Baby done put on a few pounds, Henry said in a low voice, and then they were howling with laughter, holding onto each other and pounding each other and Henry came back inside and about two weeks later Eddie was snorting the stuff too and he couldn't understand why the hell he had made such a big deal out of it, after all, it was only snorting, shit, it got you off, and as Henry (who Eddie would eventually come to think of as the great sage and eminent junkie) said, in a world that was clearly going to hell head-first, what was so low about getting high?

Time passed. Eddie didn't say how much. The gunslinger didn't ask. He guessed that Eddie knew there were a thousand excuses for getting high but no reasons, and that he had kept his habit pretty well under control. And that Henry had also managed to keep his under control. Not as well as Eddie, but enough to keep from coming completely unravelled. Because whether or not Eddie understood the truth (down deep Roland believed Eddie did), Henry must have: their positions had reversed themselves. Now Eddie held Henry's hand crossing streets.

The day came when Eddie caught Henry not snorting but skin-popping. There had been another hysterical argument, an almost exact repeat of the first one, except it had been in Henry's bedroom. It ended in almost exactly the same way, with Henry weeping and offering that implacable, inarguable defense that was utter surrender, utter admission: Eddie was right, he wasn't fit to live, not fit to eat garbage from the gutter. He would go. Eddie would never have to see him again. He just hoped he would remember all the . . .

It faded into a drone that wasn't much different from the rocky sound of the breaking waves as they trudged up the beach. Roland knew the story and said nothing. It was Eddie who didn't know the story, an Eddie who was really clear-headed for the first time in maybe ten years or more. Eddie wasn't telling the story to Roland; Eddie was finally telling the story to himself.

That was all right. So far as the gunslinger could see, time was something they had a lot of. Talk was one way to fill it.

Eddie said he was haunted by Henry's knee, the twisted scar tissue up and down his leg (of course that was all healed now, Henry barely even limped. . . except when he and Eddie were quarrelling; then the limp always seemed to get worse); he was haunted by all the things Henry had given up for him, and haunted by something much more pragmatic: Henry wouldn't last out on the streets. He would be like a rabbit let loose in a jungle filled with tigers. On his own, Henry would wind up in jail or Bellevue before a week was out.

So he begged, and Henry finally did him the favor of consenting to stick around, and six months after that Eddie also had a golden arm. From that moment things had begun to move in the steady and inevitable downward spiral which had ended with Eddie's trip to the Bahamas and Roland's sudden intervention in his life.

Another man, less pragmatic and more introspective than Roland, might have asked (to himself, if not right out loud), Why this one? Why this man to start? Why a

man who seems to promise weakness or strangeness or even outright doom? Not only did the gunslinger never ask the question; it never even formulated itself in his mind. Cuthbert would have asked; Cuthbert had questioned everything, had been poi-soned with questions, had died with one in his mouth. Now they were gone, all gone. Cort's last gunslingers, the thirteen survivors of a beginning class that had numbered fifty-six, were all dead. All dead but Roland. He was the last gunslinger, going steadily on in a world that had grown stale and sterile and empty.

Thirteen, he remembered Cort saying on the day before the Presentation Ceremonies. This is an evil number. And on the following day, for the first time in thirty years, Cort had not been present at the Ceremonies. His final crop of pupils had gone to his cottage to first kneel at his feet, presenting defenseless necks, then to rise and receive his congratulatory kiss and to allow him to load their guns for the first time. Nine weeks later, Cort was dead. Of poison, some said. Two years after his death, the final bloody civil war had begun. The red slaughter had reached the last bastion of civilization, light, and sanity, and had taken away what all of them had assumed was so strong with the casual ease of a wave taking a child's castle of sand.

So he was the last, and perhaps he had survived because the dark romance in his nature was upset by his practicality and simplicity. He understood that only three things mattered: mortality, ka, and the Tower.

Those were enough things to think about.

Eddie finished his tale around four o'clock on the third day of their northward journey up the featureless beach. The beach itself never seemed to change. If a sign of progress was wanted, it could only be obtained by looking left, to the east. There the jagged peaks of the mountains had begun to soften and slump a bit. It was possible that if they went north far enough, the mountains would become rolling hills.

With his story told, Eddie lapsed into silence and they walked without speaking for a half an hour or longer. Eddie kept stealing little glances at him. Roland knew Eddie wasn't aware that he was picking these glances up; he was still too much in himself. Roland also knew what Eddie was waiting for: a response. Some kind of response. Any kind. Twice Eddie opened his mouth only to close it again. Finally he asked what the gunslinger had known he would ask.

"So? What do you think?"

"I think you're here."

Eddie stopped, fisted hands planted on his hips. "That's all? That's it?"

"That's all I know," the gunslinger replied. His missing fingers and toe throbbed and itched. He wished for some of the astin from Eddie's world.

"You don't have any opinion on what the hell it all means?"

The gunslinger might have held up his subtracted right hand and said, Think about what this means, you silly idiot, but it no more crossed his mind to say this than it had to ask why it was Eddie, out of all the people in all the universes that might exist. "It's ka," he said, facing Eddie patiently.

"What's ka?" Eddie's voice was truculent. "I never heard of it. Except if you say it twice you come out with the baby word for shit."

"I don't know about that," the gunslinger said. "Here it means duty, or destiny, or, in the vulgate, a place you must go."

Eddie managed to look dismayed, disgusted, and amused all at the same time.

"Then say it twice, Roland, because words like that sound like shit to this

kid."

The gunslinger shrugged. "I don't discuss philosophy. I don't study history. All I know is what's past is past, and what's ahead is ahead. The second is ka, and takes care of itself."

"Yeah?" Eddie looked northward. "Well all I see ahead is about nine billion miles of this same fucking beach. If that's what's ahead, ka and kaka are the same thing. We might have enough good shells to pop five or six more of those lobster dudes, but then we're going to be down to chucking rocks at them. So where are we going?"

Roland did wonder briefly if this was a question Eddie had ever thought to ask his brother, but to ask such a question would only be an invitation to a lot of meaningless argument. So he only cocked a thumb northward and said, "There. To begin with."

Eddie looked and saw nothing but the same reach of shell- and rock-studded gray shingle. He looked back at Roland, about to scoff, saw the serene certainty on his face, and looked again. He squinted. He shielded the right side of his face from the westering sun with his right hand. He wanted desperately to see something, anything, shit, even a mirage would do, but there was nothing.

"Crap on me all you want to," Eddie said slowly, "but I say it's a goddam mean trick. I put my life on the line for you at Balazar's."

"I know you did." The gunslinger smiled—a rarity that lit his face like a momentary flash of sunlight on a dismal luring day. "That's why I've done nothing but square-deal you, Eddie. It's there. I saw it an hour ago. At first I thought it was only a mirage or wishful thinking, but it's there, all right."

Eddie looked again, looked until water ran from the corners of his eyes. At last he said, "I don't see anything up ahead but more beach. And I got twenty-twenty vision."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means if there was something there to see, I'd see it!" But Eddie wondered. Wondered how much further than his own the gunslinger's blue bullshooter's eyes could see. Maybe a little.

Maybe a lot.

"You'll see it," the gunslinger said.

"See what?"

"We won't get there today, but if you see as well as you say, you'll see it before the sun hits the water. Unless you just want to stand here chin-jawing, that is."

"Ka," Eddie said in a musing voice.

Roland nodded. "Ka."

"Kaka," Eddie said, and laughed. "Come on, Roland. Let's take a hike. And if I don't see anything by the time the sun hits the water, you owe me a chicken dinner. Or a Big Mac. Or anything that isn't lobster."

"Come on."

They started walking again, and it was at least a full hour before the sun's lower arc touched the horizon when Eddie Dean began to see the shape in tin  
inable, but definitely something. Something

new.

"Okay," he said. "I see it. You must have eyes like Superman."

"Who?"

"Never mind. You've got a really incredible case of cul-ture lag, you know it?"

"What?"

Eddie laughed. "Never mind. What is it?"

"You'll see." The gunslinger started walking again before Eddie could ask anything else.

Twenty minutes later Eddie thought he did see. Fifteen minutes after that he was sure. The object on the beach was still two, maybe three miles away, but he knew what it was. A door, of course. Another door.

Neither of them slept well that night, and they were up and walking an hour before the sun cleared the eroding shapes of the mountains. They reached the door just as the morning sun's first rays, so sublime and so still, broke over them. Those rays lighted their stubbly cheeks like lamps. They made the gunslinger forty again, and Eddie no older than Roland had been when he went out to fight Cort with his hawk David as his weapon.

This door was exactly like the first, except for what was writ upon it:

THE LADY OF SHADOWS

"So," Eddie said softly, looking at the door which simply stood here with its hinges grounded in some unknown jamb between one world and another, one universe and another. It stood with its graven message, real as rock and strange as starlight.

"So," the gunslinger agreed.

"Ka."

"Ka."

"Here is where you draw the second of your three?"

"It seems so."

The gunslinger knew what was in Eddie's mind before Eddie knew it himself. He saw Eddie make his move before Eddie knew he was moving. He could have turned and broken Eddie's arm in two places before Eddie knew it was happen-ing, but he made no move. He let Eddie snake the revolver from his right holster. It was the first time in his life he had allowed one of his weapons to be taken from him without an offer of that weapon having first been made. Yet he made no move to stop it. He turned and looked at Eddie equably, even mildly.

Eddie's face was livid, strained. His eyes showed starey whites all the way around the irises. He held the heavy revolver in both hands and still the muzzle rambled from side to side, centering, moving off, centering again and then moving off again.

"Open it," he said.

"You're being foolish," the gunslinger said in the same mild voice. "Neither of us has any idea where that door goes. It needn't open on your universe, let alone upon your world. For all either of us know, the Lady of Shadows might have eight eyes and nine arms, like Suvia. Even if it does open on your world, it might be on a time long before you were born or long after you would have died." Eddie smiled tightly. "Tell you what, Monty: I'm more than willing to trade the rubber chicken and the shitty seaside vacation for what's behind Door #2."

"I don't understand y—"

"I know you don't. It doesn't matter. Just open the fucker."

The gunslinger shook his head.

They stood in the dawn, the door casting its slanted shadow toward the ebbing sea.

"Open it!" Eddie cried. "I'm going with you! Don't you get it? I'm going with you! That doesn't mean I won't come back. Maybe I will. I mean, probably I will."

I guess I owe you that much. You been square-John with me down the line, don't think I'm not aware of the fact. But while you get whoever this Shadow-Babe is, I'm gonna find the nearest Chicken Delight and pick me up some take-out. I think the Thirty-Piece Family Pak should do for starters."

"You stay here."

"You think I don't mean it?" Eddie was shrill now, close to the edge. The gunslinger could almost see him looking down into the drifty depths of his own damnation. Eddie thumbed back the revolver's ancient hammer. The wind had fallen with the break of the day and the ebb of the tide, and the click of the hammer as Eddie brought it to full cock was very clear. "You just try me."

"I think I will," the gunslinger said.

"I'll shoot you!" Eddie screamed.

"Ka," the gunslinger replied stolidly, and turned to the door. He was reaching for the knob, but his heart was waiting: waiting to see if he would live or die.

Ka.

## CHAPTER 1

### DETTA AND ODETTA

Stripped of jargon, what Adler said was this: the perfect schizophrenic—if there was such a person—would be a man or woman not only unaware of his other persona(e), but one unaware that anything at all was amiss in his or her life.

Adler should have met Delta Walker and Odetta Holmes.

1

"—last gunslinger," Andrew said.

He had been talking for quite awhile, but Andrew always talked and Odetta usually just let it flow over her mind the way you let warm water flow over your hair and face in the shower. But this did more than catch her attention; it snagged it, as if on a thorn.

"I beg pardon?"

"Oh, it was just some column in the paper," Andrew said. "I dunno who wrote it. I didn't notice. One of those political fellas. Prob'ly you'd know, Miz Holmes. I loved him, and I cried the night he was elected—"

She smiled, touched in spite of herself. Andrew said his ceaseless chatter was something he couldn't stop, wasn't responsible for, that it was just the Irish in him coming out, and most of it was nothing—duckings and chirrupings about relatives and friends she would never meet, half-baked political opinions, weird scientific commentary gleaned from any number of weird sources (among other things, Andrew was a firm believer in flying saucers, which he called you-foes)—but this touched her because she had also cried the night he was elected.

"But I didn't cry when that son of a bitch—pardon my French, Miz Holmes—when that son of a bitch Oswald shot him, and I hadn't cried since, and it's been—what, two months?"

Three months and two days, she thought.

"Something like that, I guess."

Andrew nodded. "Then I read this column—in The Daily News, it mighta



been—yesterday, about how Johnson's prob-ably gonna do a pretty good job, but it won't be the same. The guy said America had seen the passage of the world's last gunslinger."

"I don't think John Kennedy was that at all," Odetta said, and if her voice was sharper than the one Andrew was accus-tomed to hearing (which it must have been, because she saw his eyes give a startled blink in the rear-view mirror, a blink that was more like a wince), it was because she felt herself touched by this, too. It was absurd, but it was also a fact. There was something about that phrase—America has seen the pas-sage of the world's last gunslinger—that rang deeply in her mind. It was ugly, it was untrue—John Kennedy had been a peacemaker, not a leather-slapping Billy the Kid type, that was more in the Goldwater line—but it had also for some reason given her goosebumps.

"Well, the guy said there would be no shortage of shooters in the world," Andrew went on, regarding her nervously in the rear-view mirror. "He mentioned Jack Ruby for one, and Castro, and this fellow in Haiti—"

"Duvalier," she said. "Poppa Doc."

"Yeah, him, and Diem—"

"The Diem brothers are dead."

"Well, he said Jack Kennedy was different, that's all. He said he would draw, but only if someone weaker needed him to draw, and only if there was nothing else to do. He said Kennedy was savvy enough to know that sometimes talking don't do no good. He said Kennedy knew if it's foaming at the mouth you have to shoot it."

His eyes continued to regard her apprehensively.

"Besides, it was just some column I read."

The limo was gliding up Fifth Avenue now, headed toward Central Park West, the Cadillac emblem on the end of the hood cutting the frigid February air.

"Yes," Odetta said mildly, and Andrew's eyes relaxed a trifle. "I understand. I don't agree, but I understand."

You are a liar; a voice spoke up in her mind. This was a voice she heard quite often. She had even named it. It was the voice of The Goad. You understand perfectly and agree com-pletely. Lie to Andrew if you feel it necessary, but for God's sake don't lie to yourself, woman.

Yet part of her protested, horrified. In a world which had become a nuclear powder keg upon which nearly a billion people now sat, it was a mistake—perhaps one of suicidal proportions—to believe there was a difference between good shooters and bad shooters. There were too many shaky hands holding lighters near too many fuses. This was no world for gunslingers. If there had ever been a time for them, it had passed.

Hadn't it?

She closed her eyes briefly and rubbed at her temples. She could feel one of her headaches coming on. Sometimes they threatened, like an ominous buildup of thunderheads on a hot summer afternoon, and then blew away ... as those ugly summer brews sometimes simply slipped away in one direc-tion or another, to stomp their thunders and lightnings into the ground of some other place.

She thought, however, that this time the storm was going to happen. It would come complete with thunder, lightning, and hail the size of golf-balls.

The streetlights marching up Fifth Avenue seemed much too bright.

"So how was Oxford, Miz Holmes?" Andrew asked tentatively.

"Humid. February or not, it was very humid." She paused, telling herself she

wouldn't say the words that were crowding up her throat like bile, that she would swallow them back down. To say them would be needlessly brutal. Andrew's talk of the world's last gunslinger had been just more of the man's endless prattling. But on top of everything else it was just a bit too much and it came out anyway, what she had no business saying. Her voice sounded as calm and as resolute as ever, she supposed, but she was not fooled: she knew a blurt when she heard one. "The bail bondsman came very promptly, of course; he had been notified in advance. They held onto us as long as they could nevertheless, and I held on as long as I could, but I guess they won that one, because I ended up wetting myself." She saw Andrew's eyes wince away again and she wanted to stop and couldn't stop. "It's what they want to teach you, you see. Partly because it frightens you, I suppose, and a frightened person may not come down to their precious Southland and bother them again. But I think most of them— even the dumb ones and they are by all means not all dumb— know the change will come in the end no matter what they do, and so they take the chance to degrade you while they still can. To teach you you can be degraded. You can swear before God, Christ, and the whole company of Saints that you will not, will not, will not soil yourself, but if they hold onto you long enough of course you do. The lesson is that you're just an animal in a cage, no more than that, no better than that. Just an animal in a cage. So I wet myself. I can still smell dried urine and that damned holding cell. They think we are descended from the monkeys, you know. And that's exactly what I smell like to myself right now. "A monkey."

She saw Andrew's eyes in the rear-view mirror and was sorry for the way his eyes looked. Sometimes your urine wasn't the only thing you couldn't hold.

"I'm sorry, Miz Holmes."

"No," she said, rubbing at her temples again. "I am the one who is sorry. It's been a trying three days, Andrew."

"I should think so," he said in a shocked old-maidish voice that made her laugh in spite of herself. But most of her wasn't laughing. She thought she had known what she was getting into, that she had fully anticipated how bad it could get. She had been wrong.

A trying three days. Well, that was one way to put it. Another might be that her three days in Oxford, Mississippi had been a short season in hell. But there were some things you couldn't say. Some things you would die before saying . . . unless you were called upon to testify to them before the Throne of God the Father Almighty, where, she supposed, even the truths that caused the hellish thunderstorms in that strange gray jelly between your ears (the scientists said that gray jelly was nerveless, and if that wasn't a hoot and a half she didn't know what was) must be admitted.

"I just want to get home and bathe, bathe, bathe, and sleep, sleep, sleep. Then I reckon I will be as right as rain."

"Why, sure! That's just what you're going to be!" Andrew wanted to apologize for something, and this was as close as he could come. And beyond this he didn't want to risk further conversation. So the two of them rode in unaccustomed silence to the gray Victorian block of apartments on the corner of Fifth and Central Park South, a very exclusive gray Victorian block of apartments, and she supposed that made her a block-buster, and she knew there were people in those poshy-poshy flats who would not speak to her unless they absolutely had to, and she didn't really care. Besides, she was above them, and they knew she was above

them. It had occurred to her on more than one occasion that it must have galled some of them mightily, knowing there was a nigger living in the penthouse apartment of this fine staid old building where once the only black hands allowed had been clad in white gloves or perhaps the thin black leather ones of a chauffeur. She hoped it did gall them mightily, and scolded herself for being mean, for being unchristian, but she did wish it, she hadn't been able to stop the piss pouring into the crotch of her fine silk imported underwear and she didn't seem to be able to stop this other flood of piss, either. It was mean, it was unchristian, and almost as bad—no, worse, at least as far as the Movement was concerned, it was counterproductive. They were going to win the rights they needed to win, and probably this year: Johnson, mindful of the legacy which had been left him by the slain President (and perhaps hoping to put another nail in the coffin of Barry Goldwater), would do more than oversee the passage of the Civil Rights Act; if necessary he would ram it into law. So it was important to minimize the scarring and the hurt. There was more work to be done. Hate would not help do that work. Hate would, in fact, hinder it. But sometimes you went on hating just the same. Oxford Town had taught her that, too.

2

Delta Walker had absolutely no interest in the Movement and much more modest digs. She lived in the loft of a peeling Greenwich Village apartment building. Odetta didn't know about the loft and Detta didn't know about the penthouse and the only one left who suspected something was not quite right was Andrew Feeny, the chauffeur. He had begun working for Odetta's father when Odetta was fourteen and Detta Walker hardly existed at all.

Sometimes Odetta disappeared. These disappearances might be a matter of hours or of days. Last summer she had disappeared for three weeks and Andrew had been ready to call the police when Odetta called him one evening and asked him to bring the car around at ten the next day—she planned to do some shopping, she said.

It trembled on his lips to cry out Miz Holmes! Where have you been? But he had asked this before and had received only puzzled stares—truly puzzled stares, he was sure—in return. Right here, she would say. Why, right here, Andrew—you've been driving me two or three places every day, haven't you? You aren't starting to go a little mushy in the head, are you? Then she would laugh and if she was feeling especially good (as she often seemed to feel after her disappearances), she would pinch his cheek.

"Very good, Miz Holmes," he had said. "Ten it is."

That scary time she had been gone for three weeks, Andrew had put down the phone, closed his eyes, and said a quick prayer to the Blessed Virgin for Miz Holmes's safe return. Then he had rung Howard, the doorman at her building.

"What time did she come in?"

"Just about twenty minutes ago," Howard said.

"Who brought her?"

"Dunno. You know how it is. Different car every time. Sometimes they park around the block and I don't see em at all, don't even know she's back until I hear the buzzer and look out and see it's her." Howard paused, then added: "She's got one hell of a bruise on her cheek."

Howard had been right. It sure had been one hell of a bruise, and now it was getting better. Andrew didn't like to think what it might have looked like when it was fresh. Miz Holmes appeared promptly at ten the next morning, wearing a silk sundress with spaghetti-thin straps (this had been late July), and by then the bruise had started to yellow. She had made only a perfunctory effort to cover it with make-up, as if knowing that too much effort to cover it would only draw further attention to it.

"How did you get that, Miz Holmes?" he asked.

She laughed merrily. "You know me, Andrew—clumsy as ever. My hand slipped on the grab-handle while I was getting out of the tub yesterday—I was in a hurry to catch the national news. I fell and banged the side of my face." She gauged his face. "You're getting ready to start blithering about doctors and examinations, aren't you? Don't bother answering; after all these years I can read you like a book. I won't go, so you needn't bother asking. I'm just as fine as paint. Onward, Andrew! I intend to buy half of Saks', all of Gimbels, and eat everything at Four Seasons in between."

"Yes, Miz Holmes," he had said, and smiled. It was a forced smile, and forcing it was not easy. That bruise wasn't a day old; it was a week old, at least . . . and he knew better, anyway, didn't he? He had called her every night at seven o'clock for the last week, because if there was one time when you could catch Miz Holmes in her place, it was when the Huntley-Brinkley Report came on. A regular junkie for her news was Miz Holmes. He had done it every night, that was, except last night. Then he had gone over and wheedled the passkey from Howard. A conviction had been growing on him steadily that she had had just the sort of accident she had described. . . only instead of getting a bruise or a broken bone, she had died, died alone, and was lying up there dead right now. He had let himself in, heart thumping, feeling like a cat in a dark room criss-crossed with piano wires. Only there had been nothing to be nervous about. There was a butter-dish on the kitchen counter, and although the butter had been covered it had been out long enough to be growing a good crop of mould. He got there at ten minutes of seven and had left by five after. In the course of his quick examination of the apartment, he had glanced into the bathroom. The tub had been dry, the towels neatly—even austere—arrayed, the room's many grab-handles polished to a bright steel gleam that was unspot-ted with water. He knew the accident she had described had not hap-pened.

But Andrew had not believed she was lying, either. She had believed what she had told him.

He looked in the rear-view mirror again and saw her rubbing her temples lightly with the tips of her fingers. He didn't like it. He had seen her do that too many times before one of her disappearances.

3

Andrew left the motor running so she could have the benefit of the heater, then went around to the trunk. He looked at her two suitcases with another wince. They looked as if petulant men with small minds and large bodies had kicked them relentlessly back and forth, damaging the bags in a way they did not quite dare damage Miz Holmes herself—the way they might have damaged him, for instance, if he had been there. It wasn't just that she was a woman; she was a nigger, an uppity northern nigger messing where she had no business messing, and they

probably figured a woman like that deserved just what she got. Thing was, she was also a rich nigger. Thing was, she was almost as well-known to the American public as Medgar Evers or Martin Luther King. Thing was, she'd gotten her rich nigger face on the cover of Time magazine and it was a little harder to get away with sticking someone like that in the 'toolies and then saying What? No sir, boss, we sho dint see nobody looked like that down here, did we, boys? Thing was, it was a little harder to work yourself up to hurting a woman who was the only heir to Holmes Dental Industries when there were twelve Holmes plants in the sunny South, one of them just one county over from Oxford Town, Oxford Town. So they'd done to her suitcases what they didn't dare do to her.

He looked at these mute indications of her stay in Oxford Town with shame and fury and love, emotions as mute as the scars on the luggage that had gone away looking smart and had come back looking dumb and thumped. He looked, tem-porarily unable to move, and his breath puffed out on the frosty air.

Howard was coming out to help, but Andrew paused a moment longer before grasping the handles of the cases. Who are you, Miz Holmes? Who are you really? Where do you go sometimes, and what do you do that seems so bad that you have to make up a false history of the missing hours or days even to yourself? And he thought something else in the moment before Howard arrived, something weirdly apt: Where's the rest of you?

You want to quit thinking like that. If anyone around here was going to do any thinking like that it would be Miz Holmes, but she doesn't and so you don't need to, either.

Andrew lifted the bags out of the trunk and handed them to Howard, who asked in a low voice: "Is she all right?"

"I think so," Andrew replied, also pitching his voice low. "Just tired is all. Tired all the way down to her roots."

Howard nodded, took the battered suitcases, and started back inside. He paused only long enough to tip his cap to Odetta Holmes—who was almost invisible behind the smoked glass windows—in a soft and respectful salute.

When he was gone, Andrew took out the collapsed stain-less steel scaffolding at the bottom of the trunk and began to unfold it. It was a wheelchair.

Since August 19th, 1959, some five and a half years before, the part of Odetta Holmes from the knees down had been as missing as those blank hours and days.

4

Before the subway incident, Delta Walker had had only been conscious a few times—those were like coral islands which look isolated to one above them but are, in fact, only nodes in the spine of a long archipelago which is mostly underwater. Odetta suspected Detta not at all, and Detta had no idea that there was such a person as Odetta. . . but Detta at least had a clear understanding that something was wrong, that someone was fucking with her life. Odetta's imagination novelized all sorts of things which had happened when Detta was in charge of her body; Detta was not so clever. She thought she remembered things, some things, at least, but a lot of the time she didn't.

Detta was at least partially aware of the blanks.

She could remember the china plate. She could remember that. She could remember slipping it into the pocket of her dress, looking over her shoulder all the while to make sure the Blue Woman wasn't there, peeking. She had to make sure

because the china plate belonged to the Blue Woman. The china plate was, Detta understood in some vague way, a for-special. Detta took it for that why. Detta remembered taking it to a place she knew (although she didn't know how she knew) as The Drawers, a smoking trash-littered hole in the earth where she had once seen a burning baby with plastic skin. She remembered putting the plate carefully down on the gravelly ground and then starting to step on it and stopping, remembered taking off her plain cotton panties and putting them into the pocket where the plate had been, and then carefully slipping the first finger of her left hand carefully against the cut in her at the place where Old Stupid God had joined her and all other girls and women imperfectly, but something about that place must be right, because she remembered the jolt, remembered wanting to press, remembered not pressing, remembered how delicious her vagina had been naked, without the cotton panties in the way of it and the world, and she had not pressed, not until her shoe pressed, her black patent leather shoe, not until her shoe pressed down on the plate, then she pressed on the cut with her finger the way she was pressing on the Blue Woman's forspecial china plate with her foot, she remembered the way the black patent leather shoe covered the delicate blue webbing on the edge of the plate, she remembered the press, yes, she remembered pressing in The Drawers, pressing with finger and foot, remembered the delicious promise of finger and cut, remembered that when the plate snapped with a bitter brittle snap a similar brittle pleasure had skewered upward from that cut into her guts like an arrow, she remembered the cry which had broken from her lips, an unpleasant cawing like the sound of a crow scared up from a cornpatch, she could remember staring dully at the fragments of the plate and then taking the plain white cotton panties slowly out of her dress pocket and putting them on again, step-ins, so she had heard them called in some time unhoused in memory and drifting loose like turves on a flood-tide, step-ins, good, because first you stepped out to do your business and then you stepped back in, first one shiny patent leather shoe and then the other, good, panties were good, she could remember drawing them up her legs so clearly, drawing them past her knees, a scab on the left one almost ready to fall off and leave clean pink new babyskin, yes, she could remember so clearly it might not have been a week ago or yesterday but only one single moment ago, she could remember how the waistband had reached the hem of her party dress, the clear contrast of white cotton against brown skin, like cream, yes, like that, cream from a pitcher caught suspended over coffee, the texture, the panties disappearing under the hem of the dress, except then the dress was burnt orange and the panties were not going up but down but they were still white but not cotton, they were nylon, cheap see-through nylon panties, cheap in more ways than one, and she remembered stepping out of them, she remembered how they glimmered on the floormat of the '46 Dodge DeSoto, yes, how white they were, how cheap they were, not anything dignified like underwear but cheap panties, the girl was cheap and it was good to be cheap, good to be on sale, to be on the block not even like a whore but like a good breedsow; she remembered no round china plate but the round white face of a boy, some surprised drunk fraternity boy, he was no china plate but his face was as round as the Blue Woman's china plate had been, and there was webbing on his cheeks, and this webbing looked as blue as the webbing on the Blue Woman's forspecial china plate had been, but that was only because the neon was red, the neon was garish, in the dark the neon from the roadhouse sign made the spreading blood from the places on his

cheeks where she had clawed him look blue, and he had said Why did you why did you why did you do, and then he unrolled the window so he could get his face outside to puke and she remembered hearing Dodie Stevens on the jukebox, singing about tan shoes with pink shoelaces and a big Panama with a purple hatband, she remembered the sound of his puking was like gravel in a cement mixer, and his penis, which moments before had been a livid exclamation point rising from the tufted tangle of his pubic hair, was collapsing into a weak white question mark; she remembered the hoarse gravel sounds of his vomiting stopped and then started again and she thought Well I guess he ain't made enough to lay this foundation yet and laughing and pressing her finger (which now came equipped with a long shaped nail) against her vagina which was bare but no longer bare because it was overgrown with its own coarse briared tangle, and there had been the same brittle breaking snap inside her, and it was still as much pain as it was pleasure (but better, far better, than nothing at all)/ and then he was grabbing blindly for her and saying in a hurt breaking tone Oh you goddamned nigger cunt and she went on laughing just the same, dodging him easily and snatching up her panties and opening the door on her side of the car, feeling the last blind thud of his fingers on the back of her blouse as she ran into a May night that was redolent of early honeysuckle, red-pink neon light stuttering off the gravel of some postwar parking lot, stuffing her panties, her cheap slick nylon panties not into the pocket of her dress but into a purse jumbled with a teenager's cheerful conglomeration of cosmet-ics, she was running, the light was stuttering, and then she was twenty-three and it was not panties but a rayon scarf, and she was casually slipping it into her purse as she walked along a counter in the Nice Notions section of Macy's—a scarf which sold at that time for \$1.99. Cheap.

Cheap like the white nylon panties.

Cheap.

Like her.

The body she inhabited was that of a woman who had inherited millions, but that was not known and didn't matter—the scarf was white, the edging blue, and there was that same little breaking sense of pleasure as she sat in the back seat of the taxi, and, oblivious of the driver, held the scarf in one hand, looking at it fixedly, while her other hand crept up under her tweed skirt and beneath the leg-band of her white panties, and that one long dark finger took care of the business that needed to be taken care of in a single merciless stroke.

So sometimes she wondered, in a distracted sort of way, where she was when she wasn't here, but mostly her needs were too sudden and pressing for any extended contemplation, and she simply fulfilled what needed to be fulfilled, did what needed to be done.

Roland would have understood.

5

Odetta could have taken a limo everywhere, even in 1959—although her father was still alive and she was not as fabulously rich as she would become when he died in 1962, the money held in trust for her had become hers on her twenty-fifth birthday, and she could do pretty much as she liked. But she cared very little for a phrase one of the conservative columnists had coined a year or two before—the phrase was "limosine liberal," and she was young enough not to want

to be seen as one even if she really was one. Not young enough (or stupid enough!) to believe that a few pairs of faded jeans and the khaki shirts she habitually wore in any real way changed her essential status, or riding the bus or the subway when she could have used the car (but she had been self-involved enough not to see Andrew's hurt and deep puzzlement; he liked her and thought it must be some sort of personal rejection), but young enough to still believe that gesture could sometimes overcome (or at least overset) truth. On the night of August 19th, 1959, she paid for the gesture with half her legs ... and half her mind.

6

Odetta had been first tugged, then pulled, and finally caught up in the swell which would eventually turn into a tidal wave. In 1957, when she became involved, the thing which eventually became known as the Movement had no name. She knew some of the background, knew the struggle for equality had gone on not since the Emancipation Proclamation but almost since the first boatload of slaves had been brought to America (to Georgia, in fact, the colony the British founded to get rid of their criminals and debtors), but for Odetta it always seemed to begin in the same place, with the same three words: I'm not movin. The place had been a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and the words had been spoken by a black woman named Rosa Lee Parks, and the place from which Rosa Lee Parks was not movin was from the front of the city bus to the back of the city bus, which was, of course, the Jim Crow part of the city bus. Much later, Odetta would sing "We Shall Not Be Moved" with the rest of them, and it always made her think of Rosa Lee Parks, and she never sang it without a sense of shame. It was so easy to sing we with your arms linked to the arms of a whole crowd; that was easy even for a woman with no legs. So easy to sing we, so easy to be we. There had been no we on that bus, that bus that must have stank of ancient leather and years of cigar and cigarette smoke, that bus with the curved ad cards saying things like LUCKY STRIKE L.S.M.F.T. and ATTEND THE CHURCH OF YOUR CHOICE FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE and DRINK OVALTINE! YOU'LL SEE WHAT WE MEAN! and CHESTERFIELD, TWENTY-ONE GREAT TOBACCOS MAKE TWENTY WONDER-FUL SMOKES, no we under the disbelieving gazes of the motorman, the white passengers among whom she sat, the equally disbelieving stares of the blacks at the back. No we. No marching thousands. Only Rosa Lee Parks starting a tidal wave with three words: I'm not movin. Odetta would think If I could do something like that—if I could be that brave—I think I could be happy for the rest of my life. But that sort of courage is not in me. She had read of the Parks incident, but with little interest at first. That came little by little. It was hard to say exactly when or how her imagination had been caught and fired by that at first almost soundless racequake which had begun to shake the south. A year or so later a young man she was dating more or less regularly began taking her down to the Village, where some of the young (and mostly white) folk-singers who performed there had added some new and startling songs to their



repertoire—suddenly, in addition to all those old wheezes about how John Henry had taken his hammer and outraced the new steam-hammer (killing himself in the process, lawd, lawd) and how Bar'bry Alien had cruelly rejected her lovesick young suitor (and ended up dying of shame, lawd, lawd), there were songs about how it felt to be down and out and ignored in the city, how it felt to be turned away from a job you could do because your skin was the wrong color, how it felt to be taken into a jail cell and whipped by Mr. Charlie because your skin was dark and you had dared, lawd, lawd, to sit in the white folks' section of the lunch-counter at an F.W. Woolworths' in Montgomery, Alabama.

Absurdly or not, it was only then that she had become curious about her own parents, and their parents, and their parents before them. She would never read *Roots*—she was in another world and time long before that book was written, perhaps even thought of, by Alex Haley, but it was at this absurdly late time in her life when it first dawned upon her that not so many generations back her progenitors had been taken in chains by white men. Surely the fact had occurred to her before, but only as a piece of information with no real temperature gradient, like an equation, never as something which bore intimately upon her own life.

Odetta totted up what she knew, and was appalled by the smallness of the sum. She knew her mother had been born in Odetta, Arkansas, the town for which she (the only child) had been named. She knew her father had been a small-town dentist who had invented and patented a capping process which had lain dormant and unremarked for ten years and which had then, suddenly, made him a moderately wealthy man. She knew that he had developed a number of other dental processes during the ten years before and the four years after the influx of wealth, most of them either orthodontic or cosmetic in nature, and that, shortly after moving to New York with his wife and daughter (who had been born four years after the original patent had been secured), he had founded a com-pany called Holmes Dental Industries, which was now to teeth what Squibb was to antibiotics. But when she asked him what life had been like during all the years between—the years when she hadn't been there-, and the years when she had, her father wouldn't tell her. He would say all sorts of things, but he wouldn't tell her anything. He closed that part of himself off to her. Once her ma, Alice—he called her ma or sometimes Allie if he'd had a few or was feeling good—said, "Tell her about the time those men shot at you when you drove the Ford through the covered bridge, Dan," and he gave Odetta's ma such a gray and forbidding look that her ma, always something of a sparrow, had shrunk back in her seat and said no more.

Odetta had tried her mother once or twice alone after that night, but to no avail. If she had tried before, she might have gotten something, but because he wouldn't speak, she would-n't speak either—and to him, she realized, the past—those relatives, those red dirt roads, those stores, those dirt floor cabins with glassless windows ungraced by a single simple curtsey of a curtain, those incidents of hurt and harassment, those neighbor children who went dressed in smocks which had begun life as flour sacks—all of that was for him buried away like dead teeth beneath perfect blinding white caps. He would not speak, perhaps could not, had perhaps willingly afflicted himself with a selective amnesia; the capped teeth was their life in the Greymarl Apartments on Central Park South. All else was hidden beneath that impervious outer cover. His past was so well-protected that there had been no gap to slide through, no way past

that perfect capped barrier and into the throat of revelation. Delta knew things, but Delta didn't know Odetta and Odetta didn't know Delta, and so the teeth lay as smooth and closed as a redan gate there, also. She had some of her mother's shyness in her as well as her father's unblinking (if unspoken) toughness, and the only time she had dared pursue him further on the subject, to suggest that what he was denying her was a deserved trust fund never promised and apparently never to mature, had been one night in his library. He had shaken his Wall Street Journal carefully, closed it, folded it, and laid it aside on the deal table beside the standing lamp. He had removed his rimless steel spectacles and had laid them on top of the paper. Then he had looked at her, a thin black man, thin almost to the point of emaciation, tightly kinked gray hair now drawing rapidly away from the deepening hollows of his temples where tender clocksprings of veins pulsed steadily, and he had said only, I don't talk about that part of my life, Odetta, or think about it. It would be pointless. The world had moved on since then. Roland would have understood.

7

When Roland opened the door with the words THE LADY OF THE SHADOWS written upon it, he saw things he did not understand at all—but he understood they didn't matter.

It was Eddie Dean's world, but beyond that it was only a confusion of lights, people and objects—more objects than he had ever seen in his life. Lady-things, from the look of them, and apparently for sale. Some under glass, some arranged in tempting piles and displays. None it mattered any more than the movement as that world flowed past the edges of the doorway before them. The doorway was the Lady's eyes. He was looking through them just as he had looked through Eddie's eyes when Eddie had moved up the aisle of the sky-carriage.

Eddie, on the other hand, was thunderstruck. The revolver in his hand trembled and dropped a little. The gunslinger could have taken it from him easily but did not. He only stood quietly. It was a trick he had learned a long time ago.

Now the view through the doorway made one of those turns the gunslinger found so dizzying—but Eddie found this same abrupt swoop oddly comforting. Roland had never seen a movie. Eddie had seen thousands, and what he was looking at was like one of those moving point-of-view shots they did in ones like Halloween and The Shining. He even knew what they called the gadget they did it with.

Steady-Cam. That was it.

"Star Wars, too," he muttered. "Death Star. That fuckin crack, remember?"

Roland looked at him and said nothing.

Hands—dark brown hands—entered what Roland saw as a doorway and what Eddie was already starting to think of as some sort of magic movie screen ... a movie screen which, under the right circumstances, you might be able to walk into the way that guy had just walked out of the screen and into the real world in The Purple Rose of Cairo. Bitchin movie.

Eddie hadn't realized how bitchin until just now.

Except that movie hadn't been made yet on the other side of the door he was looking through. It was New York, okay— somehow the very sound of the taxi-cab horns, as mute and faint as they were—proclaimed that—and it was some New York department store he had been in at one time or another, but it was . . . was . . .

"It's older," he muttered.

"Before your when?" the gunslinger asked.

Eddie looked at him and laughed shortly. "Yeah. If you want to put it that way, yeah."

"Hello, Miss Walker," a tentative voice said. The view in the doorway rose so suddenly that even Eddie was a bit dizzied and he saw a saleswoman who obviously knew the owner of the black hands—knew her and either didn't like her or feared her. Or both. "Help you today?"

"This one." The owner of the black hands held up a white scarf with a bright blue edge. "Don't bother to wrap it up, babe, just stick it in a bag."

"Cash or ch—"

"Cash, it's always cash, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's fine, Miss Walker."

"I'm so glad you approve, dear."

There was a little grimace on the salesgirl's face—Eddie just caught it as she turned away. Maybe it was something as simple as being talked to that way by a woman the salesgirl considered an "uppity nigger" (again it was more his experience in movie theaters than any knowledge of history or even life on the streets as he had lived it that caused this thought, because this was like watching a movie either set or made in the '60s, something like that one with Sidney Steiger and Rod Poitier, *In the Heat of the Night*), but it could also be some-thing even simpler: Roland's *Lady of the Shadows* was, black or white, one rude bitch.

And it didn't really matter, did it? None of it made a damned bit of difference. He cared about one thing and one thing only and that was getting the fuck out. That was New York, he could almost smell New York.

And New York meant smack.

He could almost smell that, too.

Except there was a hitch, wasn't there?

One big motherfucker of a hitch.

8

Roland watched Eddie carefully, and although he could have killed him six times over at almost any time he wanted, he had elected to remain still and silent and let Eddie work the situation out for himself. Eddie was a lot of things, and a lot of them were not nice (as a fellow who had consciously let a child drop to his death, the gunslinger knew the difference between nice and not quite well), but one thing Eddie wasn't was stupid.

He was a smart kid.

He would figure it out.

So he did.

He looked back at Roland, smiled without showing his teeth, twirled the gunslinger's revolver once on his finger, clumsily, burlesquing a show-shooter's fancy coda, and then he held it out to Roland, butt first.

"This thing might as well be a piece of shit for all the good it can do me, isn't that right?"

You can talk bright when you want to, Roland thought. Why do you so often choose to talk stupid, Eddie? Is it because you think that's the way they talked in the

place where your brother went with his guns?

"Isn't that right?" Eddie repeated.

Roland nodded.

"If I had plugged you, what would have happened to that door?"

"I don't know. I suppose the only way to find out would be to try it and see."

"Well, what do you think would happen?"

"I think it would disappear."

Eddie nodded. That was what he thought, too. Poof! Gone like magic! Now ya see it, my friends, now ya don't. It was really no different than what would happen if the projectionist in a movie-theater were to draw a six-shooter and plug the projector, was it?

If you shot the projector, the movie stopped.

Eddie didn't want the picture to stop.

Eddie wanted his money's worth.

"You can go through by yourself," Eddie said slowly.

"Yes."

"Sort of."

"Yes."

"You wind up in her head. Like you wound up in mine."

"Yes."

"So you can hitchhike into my world, but that's all."

Roland said nothing. Hitchhike was one of the words Eddie sometimes used that he didn't exactly understand . . . but he caught the drift.

"But you could go through in your body. Like at Balazar's." He was talking out loud but really talking to himself. "Except you'd need me for that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then take me with you."

The gunslinger opened his mouth, but Eddie was already rushing on.

"Not now, I don't mean now," he said. "I know it would cause a riot or some goddam thing if we just . . . popped out over there." He laughed rather wildly.

"Like a magician pull-ing rabbits out of a hat, except without any hat, sure I did. We'll wait until she's alone, and—"

"No."

"I'll come back with you," Eddie said. "I swear it, Roland. I mean, I know you got a job to do, and I know I'm a part of it. I know you saved my ass at Customs, but I think I saved yours at Balazar's—now what do you think?"

"I think you did," Roland said. He remembered the way Eddie had risen up from behind the desk, regardless of the risk, and felt an instant of doubt.

But only an instant.

"So? Peter pays Paul. One hand washes the other. All I want to do is go back for a few hours. Grab some take-out chicken, maybe a box of Dunkin Donuts." Eddie nodded toward the doorway, where things had begun to move again. "So what do you say?"

"No," the gunslinger said, but for a moment he was hardly thinking about Eddie.

That movement up the aisle—the Lady, whoever she was, wasn't moving the way an ordinary person moved—wasn't moving, for instance, the way Eddie had moved when Roland looked through his eyes, or (now that he stopped to think of it, which he never had before, any more than he had ever stopped and really noticed the constant presence of his own nose in the lower range of his peripheral vision)

the way he moved himself. When one walked, vision became a mild pendulum: left leg, right leg, left leg, right leg, the world rocking back and forth so mildly and gently that after awhile—shortly after you began to walk, he supposed—you simply ignored it. There was none of that pendulum movement in the Lady's walk—she simply moved smoothly up the aisle, as if riding along tracks. Ironically, Eddie had had this same perception . . . only to Eddie it had looked like a SteadiCam shot. He had found this perception comforting because it was familiar.

To Roland it was alien . . . but then Eddie was breaking in, his voice shrill.

"Well why not? Just why the fuck not?"

"Because you don't want chicken," the gunslinger said.

"I know what you call the things you want, Eddie. You want to 'fix.' You want to 'score.' "

"So what?" Eddie cried—almost shrieked. "So what if I do? I said I'd come back with you! You got my promise! I mean, you got my fuckin PROMISE! What else do you want? You want me to swear on my mother's name? Okay, I swear on my mother's name! You want me to swear on my brother Henry's name? All right, I swear! I swear! I SWEAR!"

Enrico Balazar would have told him, but the gunslinger didn't need the likes of Balazar to tell him this one fact of life: Never trust a junkie.

Roland nodded toward the door. "Until after the Tower, at least, that part of your life is done. After that I don't care. After that you're free to go to hell in your own way. Until then I need you."

"Oh you fuckin shitass liar," Eddie said softly. There was no audible emotion in his voice, but the gunslinger saw the glisten of tears in his eyes. Roland said nothing. "You know there ain't gonna be no after, not for me, not for her, or whoever the Christ this third guy is. Probably not for you, either—you look as fuckin wasted as Henry did at his worst. If we don't die on the way to your Tower we'll sure as shit die when we get there so why are you lying to me?"

The gunslinger felt a dull species of shame but only repeated: "At least for now, that part of your life is done."

"Yeah?" Eddie said. "Well, I got some news for you, Roland. I know what's gonna happen to your real body when you go through there and inside of her. I know because I saw it before. I don't need your guns. I got you by that fabled place where the short hairs grow, my friend. You can even turn her head the way you turned mine and watch what I do to the rest of you while you're nothing but your goddam ka. I'd like to wait until nightfall, and drag you down by the water. Then you could watch the lobsters chow up on the rest of you. But you might be in too much of a hurry for that."

Eddie paused. The graty breaking of the waves and the steady hollow conch of the wind both seemed very loud.

"So I think I'll just use your knife to cut your throat."

"And close that door forever?"

"You say that part of my life is done. You don't just mean smack, either. You mean New York, America, my time, every-thing. If that's how it is, I want this part done, too. The scenery sucks and the company stinks. There are times, Roland, when you make Jimmy Swaggart look almost sane."

"There are great wonders ahead," Roland said. "Great adventures. More than that, there is a quest to course upon, and a chance to redeem your honor. There's something else, too. You could be a gunslinger. I needn't be the last after all.

It's in you, Eddie. I see it. I feel it."

Eddie laughed, although now the tears were coursing down his cheeks. "Oh, wonderful. Wonderful! Just what I need! My brother Henry. He was a gunslinger. In a place called Viet Nam, that was. It was great for him. You should have seen him when he was on a serious nod, Roland. He couldn't find his way to the fuckin' bathroom without help. If there wasn't any help handy, he just sat there and watched Big Time Wrestling and did it in his fuckin' pants. It's great to be a gunslinger. I can see that. My brother was a dooper and you're out of your fucking gourd."

"Perhaps your brother was a man with no clear idea of honor."

"Maybe not. We didn't always get a real clear picture of what that was in the Projects. It was just a word you used after You if you happened to get caught smoking reefer or lifting the spinners off some guy's T-Bird and got ho'ed up in court for it."

Eddie was crying harder now, but he was laughing, too.

"Your friends, now. This guy you talk about in your sleep, for instance, this dude Cuthbert—"

The gunslinger started in spite of himself. Not all his long years of training could stay that start.

"Did they get this stuff you're talking about like a god-dam Marine recruiting sergeant? Adventure, quests, honor?"

"They understood honor, yes," Roland said slowly, thinking of all the vanished others.

"Did it get them any further than gunslinging got my brother?"

The gunslinger said nothing.

"I know you," Eddie said. "I seen lots of guys like you. "You're just another kook singing 'Onward Christian Sol-diers' with a flag in one hand and a gun in the other. I don't want no honor. I just want a chicken dinner and fix. In that order. So I'm telling you: go on through. You can. But the minute you're gone, I'm gonna kill the rest of you."

The gunslinger said nothing.

Eddie smiled crookedly and brushed the tears from his cheeks with the backs of his hands. "You want to know what we call this back home?"

"What?"

"A Mexican stand-off."

For a moment they only looked at each other, and then Roland looked sharply into the doorway. They had both been partially aware—Roland rather more than Eddie—that there had been another of those swerves, this time to the left. Here was an array of sparkling jewelry. Some was under protective glass but because most wasn't, the gunslinger supposed it was trumpery stuff . . . what Eddie would have called costume jewelry. The dark brown hands examined a few things in what seemed an only cursory manner, and then another salesgirl appeared. There had been some conversation which neither of them really noticed, and the Lady (some Lady, Eddie thought) asked to see something else. The salesgirl went away, and that was when Roland's eyes swung sharply back.

The brown hands reappeared, only now they held a purse. It opened. And suddenly the hands were scooping things—seemingly, almost certainly, at random—into the purse.

"Well, you're collecting quite a crew, Roland," Eddie said, bitterly amused.

"First you got your basic white junkie, and then you got your basic black

shoplif—"

But Roland was already moving toward the doorway between the worlds, moving swiftly, not looking at Eddie at all.

"I mean it!" Eddie screamed. "You go through and I'll cut your throat, I'll cut your fucking thr—"

Before he could finish, the gunslinger was gone. All that was left of him was his limp, breathing body lying upon the beach.

For a moment Eddie only stood there, unable to believe that Roland had done it, had really gone ahead and done this idiotic thing in spite of his promise—his sincere fucking guarantee, as far as that went—of what the consequences would be.

He stood for a moment, eyes rolling like the eyes of a frightened horse at the onset of a thunderstorm . . . except of course there was no thunderstorm, except for the one in the head.

All right. All right, goddammit.

There might only be a moment. That was all the gun-slinger might give him, and Eddie damned well knew it. He glanced at the door and saw the black hands freeze with a gold necklace half in and half out of a purse that already glittered like a pirate's cache of treasure. Although he could not hear it, Eddie sensed that Roland was speaking to the owner of the black hands.

He pulled the knife from the gunslinger's purse and then rolled over the limp, breathing body which lay before the doorway. The eyes were open but blank, rolled up to the whites.

"Watch, Roland!" Eddie screamed. That monotonous, idiotic, never-ending wind blew in his ears. Christ, it was enough to drive anyone bugshit. "Watch very closely! I want to complete your fucking education! I want to show you what happens when you fuck over the Dean brothers!"

He brought the knife down to the gunslinger's throat.

## CHAPTER 2 RINGING THE CHANGES

1

August, 1959:

When the intern came outside half an hour later, he found Julio leaning against the ambulance which was still parked in the emergency bay of Sisters of Mercy Hospital on 23rd Street. The heel of one of Julio's pointy-toed boots was hooked over the front fender. He had changed to a pair of glaring pink pants and a blue shirt with his name written in gold stitches over the left pocket: his bowling league outfit. George checked his watch and saw that Julio's team—The Spies of Supremacy— would already be rolling.

"Thought you'd be gone," George Shavers said. He was an intern at Sisters of Mercy. "How're your guys gonna win without the Wonder Hook?"

"They got Miguel Basale to take my place. He ain't steady, but he gets hot sometimes. They'll be okay." Julio paused. "I was curious about how it came out." He was the driver, a Cubano with a sense of humor George wasn't even sure

Julio knew he had. He looked around. Neither of the paramedics who rode with them were in sight.

"Where are they?" George asked.

"Who? The fuckin Bobbsey Twins? Where do you think they are? Chasin Minnesota poontang down in the Village. Any idea if she'll pull through?"

"Don't know."

He tried to sound sage and knowing about the unknown, but the fact was that first the resident on duty and then a pair of surgeons had taken the black woman away from him almost faster than you could say hail Mary fulla grace (which had actually been on his lips to say—the black lady really hadn't looked as if she was going to last very long).

"She lost a hell of a lot of blood."

"No shit."

George was one of sixteen interns at Sisters of Mercy, and one of eight assigned to a new program called Emergency Ride. The theory was that an intern riding with a couple of paramedics could sometimes make the difference between life and death in an emergency situation. George knew that most drivers and paras thought that wet-behind-the-ears interns were as likely to kill red-blankets as save them, but George thought maybe it worked.

Sometimes.

Either way it made great PR for the hospital, and although the interns in the program liked to bitch about the extra eight hours (without pay) it entailed each week, George Shavers sort of thought most of them felt the way he did himself—proud, tough, able to take whatever they threw his way.

Then had come the night the T.W.A. Tri-Star crashed at Idlewild. Sixty-five people on board, sixty of them what Julio Estevez referred to as D.R.T.—Dead Right There—and three of the remaining five looking like the sort of thing you might scrape out of the bottom of a coal-furnace. . . except what you scraped out of the bottom of a coal furnace didn't moan and shriek and beg for someone to give them morphine or kill them, did they? If you can take this, he thought afterward, remembering the severed limbs lying amid the remains of aluminum flaps and seat-cushions and a ragged chunk of tail with the numbers 17 and a big red letter T and part of a W on it, remembering the eyeball he had seen resting on top of a charred Samsonite suitcase, remembering a child's teddybear with staring shoe-button eyes lying beside a small red sneaker with a child's foot still in it, if you can take this, baby, you can take anything. And he had been taking it just fine. He went right on taking it just fine all the way home. He went on taking it just fine through a late supper that consisted of a Swanson's turkey TV dinner. He went to sleep with no prob-lem at all, which proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was taking it just fine. Then, in some dead dark hour of the morning he had awakened from a hellish nightmare in which the thing resting on top of the charred Samsonite suitcase had not been a teddybear but his mother's head, and her eyes had opened, and they had been charred; they were the staring expressionless shoebutton eyes of the teddy-bear, and her mouth had opened, revealing the broken fangs which had been her dentures up until the T.W.A. Tri-Star was struck by lightning on its final approach, and she had whispered You couldn't save me, George, we scrimped for you, we saved for you, we went without for you, your dad fixed up the scrape you got into with that girl and you STILL COULDN'T SAVE ME GOD DAMN YOU, and he had awakened screaming, and he was vaguely aware of someone pounding on the wall, but by then he was



already pelting into the bathroom, and he barely made it to the kneeling penitential position before the porcelain altar before dinner came up the express elevator. It came special delivery, hot and steaming and still smelling like processed turkey. He knelt there and looked into the bowl, at the chunks of half-digested turkey and the carrots which had lost none of their original fluorescent brightness, and this word flashed across his mind in large red letters:

ENOUGH

Correct.

It was:

ENOUGH.

He was going to get out of the sawbones business. He was going to get out because:

ENOUGH WAS ENOUGH.

He was going to get out because Popeye's motto was That's all I can stand and I can't stand nummore, and Popeye was as right as rain.

He had flushed the toilet and gone back to bed and fell asleep almost instantly and awoke to discover he still wanted to be a doctor, and that was a goddam good thing to know for sure, maybe worth the whole program, whether you called it Emergency Ride or Bucket of Blood or Name That Tune.

He still wanted to be a doctor.

He knew a lady who did needlework. He paid her ten dollars he couldn't afford to make him a small, old-fashioned-looking sampler. It said:

IF YOU CAN TAKE THIS, YOU CAN TAKE ANYTHING.

Yes. Correct.

The messy business in the subway happened four weeks later.

2

"That lady was some fuckin weird, you know it?" Julio said.

George breathed an interior sigh of relief. If Julio hadn't opened the subject, George supposed he wouldn't have had the sack. He was an intern, and someday he was going to be a full-fledged doc, he really believed that now, but Julio was a vet, and you didn't want to say something stupid in front of a vet. He would only laugh and say Hell, I seen that shit a thousand times, kid. Get y'self a towel and wipe off whatever it is behind your ears, cause it's wet and drippin down the sides of your face.

But apparently Julio hadn't seen it a thousand times, and that was good, because George wanted to talk about it.

"She was weird, all right. It was like she was two people."

He was amazed to see that now Julio was the one who looked relieved, and he was struck with sudden shame. Julio Estavez, who was going to do no more than pilot a limo with a couple of pulsing red lights on top for the rest of his life, had just shown more courage than he had been able to show.

"You got it, doc. Hunnert per cent." He pulled out a pack of Chesterfields and stuck one in the corner of his mouth.

"Those things are gonna kill you, my man," George said.

Julio nodded and offered the pack.

They smoked in silence for awhile. The paras were maybe chasing tail like Julio had said ... or maybe they'd just had enough. George had been scared, all right,

no joke about that. But he also knew he had been the one who saved the woman, not the paras, and he knew Julio knew it too. Maybe that was really why Julio had waited. The old black woman had helped, and the white kid who had dialed the cops while everyone else (except the old black woman) had just stood around watching like it was some goddam movie or TV show or something, part of a Peter Gunn episode, maybe, but in the end it had all come down to George Shavers, one scared cat doing his duty the best way he could.

The woman had been waiting for the train Duke Ellington held in such high regard—that fabled A-train. Just been a pretty young black woman in jeans and a khaki shirt waiting for the fabled A-Train so she could go uptown someplace. Someone had pushed her.

George Shavers didn't have the slightest idea if the police had caught the slug who had done it—that wasn't his busi-ness. His business was the woman who had tumbled scream-ing into the tube of the tunnel in front of that fabled A-train. It had been a miracle that she had missed the third rail; the fabled third rail that would have done to her what the State of New York did to the bad guys up at Sing-Sing who got a free ride on that fabled A-train the cons called Old Sparky. Oboy, the miracles of electricity.

She tried to crawl out of the way but there hadn't been quite enough time and that fabled A-train had come into the station screeching and squalling and puking up sparks because the motorman had seen her but it was too late, too late for him and too late for her. The steel wheels of that fabled A-train had cut the living legs off her from just above the knees down. And while everyone else (except for the white kid who had dialed the cops) had only stood there pulling their puds (or pushing their pudenda, George supposed), the elderly black woman had jumped down, dislocating one hip in the process (she would later be given a Medal of Bravery by the Mayor), and had used the doorag on her head to cinch a tourniquet around one of the young woman's squirting thighs. The young white guy was screaming for an ambulance on one side of the station and the old black chick was screaming for someone to give her a help, to give her a tie-off for God's sake, anything, anything at all, and finally some elderly white business type had reluctantly surrendered his belt, and the elderly black chick looked up at him and spoke the words which became the headline of the New York Daily News the next day, the words which made her an authentic American apple-pie heroine: "Thank you, bro." Then she had noosed the belt around the young woman's left leg halfway between the young woman's crotch and where her left knee had been until that fabled A-train had come along.

George had heard someone say to someone else that the young black woman's last words before passing out had been "WHO WAS THAT MAHFAH? I GONE HUNT HIM DOWN AND KILL HIS ASS!"

There was no way to punch holes far enough up for the elderly black woman to notch the belt, so she simply held on like grim old death until Julio, George, and the paras arrived.

George remembered the yellow line, how his mother had told him he must never, never, never go past the yellow line while he was waiting for a train (fabled or otherwise), the stench of oil and electricity when he hopped down onto the cinders, remembered how hot it had been. The heat seemed to be baking off him, off the elderly black woman, off the young black woman, off the train, the tunnel, the unseen sky above and hell itself beneath. He remembered thinking

incoherently // they put a blood-pressure cuff on me now I'd go off the dial and then he went cool and yelled for his bag, and when one of the paras tried to jump down with it he told the para to fuck off, and the para had looked startled, as if he was really seeing George Shavers for the first time, and he had fucked off.

George tied off as many veins and arteries as he could tie off, and when her heart started to be-bop he had shot her full of Digitalin. Whole blood arrived. Cops brought it. Want to bring her up, doc? one of them had asked and George had told him not yet, and he got out the needle and stuck the juice to her like she was a junkie in dire need of a fix.

Then he let them take her up.

Then they had taken her back.

On the way she had awakened.

Then the weirdness started.

3

George gave her a shot of Demerol when the paras loaded her into the ambulance—she had begun to stir and cry out weakly. He gave her a boost hefty enough for him to be confident she would remain quiet until they got to Sisters of Mercy. He was ninety per cent sure she would still be with them when they got there, and that was one for the good guys.

Her eyes began to flutter while they were still six blocks from the hospital, however. She uttered a thick moan.

"We can shoot her up again, doc," one of the paras said.

George was hardly aware this was the first time a para-medic had deigned to call him anything other than George or, worse, Georgie. "Are you nuts? I'd just as soon not confuse D.O.A. and O.D. if it's all the same to you."

The paramedic drew back.

George looked back at the young black woman and saw the eyes returning his gaze were awake and aware.

"What has happened to me?" she asked.

George remembered the man who had told another man about what the woman had supposedly said (how she was going to hunt the motherfucker down and kill his ass, etc., etc.). That man had been white. George decided now it had been pure invention, inspired either by that odd human urge to make naturally dramatic situations even more dramatic, or just race prejudice. This was a cultured, intelligent woman.

"You've had an accident," he said. "You were—"

Her eyes slipped shut and he thought she was going to sleep again. Good. Let someone else tell her she had lost her legs. Someone who made more than \$7,600 a year. He had shifted a little to the left, wanting to check her b.p. again, when she opened her eyes once more. When she did, George Shavers was looking at a different woman.

"Fuckah cut off mah laigs. I felt 'em go. Dis d'ambulance?"

"Y-Y-Yes," George said. Suddenly he needed something to drink. Not necessarily alcohol. Just something wet. His voice was dry. This was like watching Spencer Tracy in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, only for real.

"Dey get dat honkey mahfah?"

"No," George said, thinking The guy got it right, god-dam, the guy did actually

get it right.

He was vaguely aware that the paramedics, who had been hovering (perhaps hoping he would do something wrong) were now backing off.

"Good. Honky fuzz jus be lettin him off anyway. I be gittin him. I be cuttin his cock off. Sumbitch! I tell you what I goan do t'dat sumbitch! I tell you one thing, you sumbitch honky! I goan tell you . . . tell..."

Her eyes fluttered again and George had thought Yes, go to sleep, please go to sleep, I don't get paid for this, I don't understand this, they told us about shock but nobody men-tioned schizophrenia as one of the—

The eyes opened. The first woman was there.

"What sort of accident was it?" she asked. "I remember coming out of the I—"

"Eye?" he said stupidly.

She smiled a little. It was a painful smile. "The Hungry I. It's a coffee house."

"Oh. Yeah. Right."

The other one, hurt or not, had made him feel dirty and a little ill. This one made him feel like a knight in an Arthurian tale, a knight who has successfully rescued the Lady Fair from the jaws of the dragon.

"I remember walking down the stairs to the platform, and after that—"

"Someone pushed you. "It sounded stupid, but what was wrong with that? It was stupid.

"Pushed me in front of the train?"

"Yes."

"Have I lost my legs?"

George tried to swallow and couldn't. There seemed to be nothing in his throat to grease the machinery.

"Not all of them," he said inanely, and her eyes closed.

Let it be a faint, he thought then, please let it be a f—

They opened, blazing. One hand came up and slashed five slits through the air within an inch of his face—any closer and he would have been in the E.R. getting his cheek stitched up instead of smoking Chesties with Julio Estavez.

"YOU AIN'T NUTHIN BUT A BUNCH A HONKY SONSA BITCHES!" she screamed. Her face was

monstrous, her eyes full of hell's own light. It wasn't even the face of a human being. "GOAN KILL EVERY MAHFAHIN HONKY I SEE! GOAN GELD EM FUST! GOAN CUT OFF

THEIR BALLS AND SPIT EM IN THEY FACES! GOAN—"

It was crazy. She talked like a cartoon black woman, Butterfly McQueen gone Loony Tunes. She—or it—also seemed superhuman. This screaming, writhing thing could not have just undergone impromptu surgery by subway train half an hour ago. She bit. She clawed out at him again and again. Snot spat from her nose. Spit flew from her lips. Filth poured from her mouth.

"Shoot her up, doc!" one of the paras yelled. His face was pale. "Fa crissakes shoot her up!" The para reached toward the supply case. George shoved his hand aside.

"Fuck off, chickenshit."

George looked back at his patient and saw the calm, cultured eyes of the other one looking at him.

"Will I live?" she asked in a conversational tea-room voice. He thought, She is unaware of her lapses. Totally unaware. And, after a moment: So is the other

one, for that matter.

"I—" He gulped, rubbed at his galloping heart through his tunic, and then ordered himself to get control of this. He had saved her life. Her mental problems were not his concern.

"Are you all right?" she asked him, and the genuine concern in her voice made him smile a little—her asking him.

"Yes, ma'am."

"To which question are you responding?"

For a moment he didn't understand, then did. "Both," he said, and took her hand. She squeezed it, and he looked into her shining lucent eyes and thought A man could fall in love, and that was when her hand turned into a claw and she was telling him he was a honky mahfah, and she wadn't just goan take his balls, she was goan chew on those mahfahs.

He pulled away, looking to see if his hand was bleeding, thinking incoherently that if it was he would have to do something about it, because she was poison, the woman was poison, and being bitten by her would be about the same as being bitten by a copperhead or rattler. There was no blood. And when he looked again, it was the other woman—the first woman.

"Please," she said. "I don't want to die. PI—" Then she went out for good, and that was good. For all of them.

4

"So whatchoo think?" Julio asked.

"About who's gonna be in the Series?" George squashed the butt under the heel of his loafer. "White Sox. I got 'em in the pool."

"Whatchoo think about that lady?"

"I think she might be schizophrenic," George said slowly.

"Yeah, I know that. I mean, what's gonna happen to her?"

"I don't know."

"She needs help, man. Who gonna give it?"

"Well, I already gave her one," George said, but his face felt hot, as if he were blushing.

Julio looked at him. "If you already gave her all the help you can give her, you shoulda let her die, doc."

George looked at Julio for a moment, but found he couldn't stand what he saw in Julio's eyes—not accusation but sadness.

So he walked away.

He had places to go.

5

The Time of the Drawing:

In the time since the accident it was, for the most part, still Odetta Holmes who was in control, but Delta Walker had come forward more and more, the thing Detta liked to do best was steal. It didn't matter that her booty was always little more than junk, no more than it mattered that she often threw it away later.

The taking was what mattered.

When the gunslinger entered her head in Macy's, Delta screamed in a combination of fury and horror and terror, her hands freezing on the junk jewelry she was scooping into her purse.

She screamed because when Roland came into her mind, when he came forward, she for a moment sensed the other, as if a door had been swung open inside of her head.

And she screamed because the invading raping presence was a honky.

She could not see but nonetheless sensed his whiteness.

People looked around. A floorwalker saw the screaming woman in the wheelchair with her purse open, saw one hand frozen in the act of stuffing costume jewelry into a purse that looked (even from a distance of thirty feet) worth three times the stuff she was stealing.

The floorwalker yelled, "Hey Jimmy!" and Jimmy Halvorsen, one of Macy's house detectives, looked around and saw what was happening. He started toward the black woman in the wheelchair on a dead run. He couldn't help running—he had been a city cop for eighteen years and it was built into his system—but he was already thinking it was gonna be a shit bust. Little kids, cripples, nuns; they were always a shit bust. Busting them was like kicking a drunk. They cried a little in front of the judge and then took a walk. It was hard to convince judges that cripples could also be slime.

But he ran just the same.

6

Roland was momentarily horrified by the snakepit of hate and revulsion in which he found himself. . . and then he heard the woman screaming, saw the big man with the potato-sack belly running toward her/him, saw people looking, and took control.

Suddenly he was the woman with the dusky hands. He sensed some strange duality inside her, but couldn't think about it now.

He turned the chair and began to shove it forward. The aisle rolled past him/her. People dived away to either side. The purse was lost, spilling Delta's credentials and stolen treasure in a wide trail along the floor. The man with the heavy gut skidded on bogus gold chains and lipstick tubes and then fell on his ass.

7

Shit! Halvorsen thought furiously, and for a moment one hand clawed under his sport-coat where there was a .38 in a clamshell holster. Then sanity reasserted itself. This was no drug bust or armed robbery; this was a crippled black lady in a wheelchair. She was rolling it like it was some punk's drag-racer, but a crippled black lady was all she was just the same. What was he going to do, shoot her? That would be great, wouldn't it? And where was she going to go? There was nothing at the end of the aisle but two dressing rooms.

He picked himself up, massaging his aching ass, and began after her again, limping a little now.

The wheelchair flashed into one of the dressing rooms. The door slammed, just clearing the push-handles on the back.

Got you now, bitch, Jimmy thought. And I'm going to give you one hell of a scare. I don't care if you got five orphan children and only a year to live. I'm

not gonna hurt you, but oh babe I'm gonna shake your dice.  
He beat the floorwalker to the dressing room, slammed the door open with his left shoulder, and it was empty.  
No black woman.  
No wheelchair.  
No nothing.  
He looked at the floorwalker, starey-eyed.  
"Other one!" the floorwalker yelled. "Other one!"  
Before Jimmy could move, the floorwalker had busted open the door of the other dressing room. A woman in a linen skirt and a Playtex Living Bra screamed piercingly and crossed her arms over her chest. She was very white and very definitely not crippled.  
"Pardon me," the floorwalker said, feeling hot crimson flood his face.  
"Get out of here, you pervert!" the woman in the linen skirt and the bra cried.  
"Yes, ma'am," the floorwalker said, and closed the door.  
At Macy's, the customer was always right.  
He looked at Halvorsen.  
Halvorsen looked back.  
"What is this shit?" Halvorsen asked. "Did she go in there or not?"  
"Yeah, she did."  
"So where is she?"  
The floorwalker could only shake his head. "Let's go back and pick up the mess."  
"You pick up the mess," Jimmy Halvorsen said. "I feel like I just broke my ass in nine pieces." He paused. "To tell you the truth, me fine bucko, I also feel extremely confused."

8

The moment the gunslinger heard the dressing room door bang shut behind him, he rammed the wheelchair around in a half turn, looking for the doorway. If Eddie had done what he had promised, it would be gone.  
But the door was open. Roland wheeled the Lady of Shadows through it.

### CHAPTER 3 ODETTA ON THE OTHER SIDE

1

Not long after, Roland would think: Any other woman, crippled or otherwise, suddenly shoved all the way down the aisle of the mart in which she was doing business—monkey-business, you may call it if you like—by a stranger inside her head, shoved into a little room while some man behind her yelled for her to stop, then suddenly turned, shoved again where there was by rights no room in which to shove, then finding herself suddenly in an entirely different world . . .  
. I think any other woman, under those circumstances, would have most certainly have asked "Where am I?" before all else.  
Instead, Odetta Holmes asked almost pleasantly, "What exactly are you planning

to do with that knife, young man?"

2

Roland looked up at Eddie, who was crouched with his knife held less than a quarter of an inch over the skin. Even with his uncanny speed, there was no way the gunslinger could move fast enough to evade the blade if Eddie decided to use it.

"Yes," Roland said. "What are you planning to do with it?"

"I don't know," Eddie said, sounding completely disgusted with himself. "Cui bait, I guess. Sure doesn't look like I came here to fish, does it?"

He threw the knife toward the Lady's chair, but well to the right. It stuck, quivering, in the sand to its hilt.

Then the Lady turned her head and began, "I wonder if you could please explain where you've taken m—"

She stopped. She had said I wonder if you before her head had gotten around far enough to see there was no one behind her, but the gunslinger observed with some real interest that she went on speaking for a moment anyway, because the fact of her condition made certain things elementary truths of her life—if she had moved, for instance, someone must have moved her. But there was no one behind her.

No one at all.

She looked back at Eddie and the gunslinger, her dark eyes troubled, confused, and alarmed, and now she asked. "Where am I? Who pushed me? How can I be here? How can I be dressed, for that matter, when I was home watching the twelve o'clock news in my robe? Who am I? Where is this? Who are you?"

"Who am I?" she asked, the gunslinger thought. The dam broke and there was a flood of questions; that was to be expected. But that one question—"Who am I?"—even now I don't think she knows she asked it.

Or when.

Because she had asked before.

Even before she had asked who they were, she had asked who she was.

3

Eddie looked from the lovely young/old face of the black woman in the wheelchair to Roland's face.

"How come she doesn't know?"

"I can't say. Shock, I suppose."

"Shock took her all the way back to her living room, before she left for Macy's?

You telling me the last thing she remembers is sitting in her bathrobe and listening to some blow-dried dude talk about how they found that gonzo down in the Florida Keys with Christa McAuliff's left hand mounted on his den wall next to his prize marlin?"

Roland didn't answer.

More dazed than ever, the Lady said, "Who is Christa McAuliff? Is she one of the missing Freedom Riders?"

Now it was Eddie's turn not to answer. Freedom Riders? What the hell were they?"

The gunslinger glanced at him and Eddie was able to read his eyes easily enough: Can't you see she's in shock?



I know what you mean, Roland old buddy, but it only washes up to a point. I felt a little shock myself when you came busting into my head like Walter Payton on crack, but it didn't wipe out my memory banks.

Speaking of shock, he'd gotten another pretty good jolt when she came through.

He had been kneeling over Roland's inert body, the knife just above the vulnerable skin of the throat. . .but the truth was Eddie couldn't have used the knife anyway—not then, anyway. He was staring into the doorway, hypnotized, as an aisle of Macy's rushed forward—he was reminded again of *The Shining*, where you saw what the little boy was seeing as he rode his trike through the hallways of that haunted hotel. He remembered the little boy had seen this creepy pair of dead twins in one of those hallways. The end of this aisle was much more mundane: a white door. The words ONLY TWO GARMENTS AT ONE TIME, PLEASE were printed on it in discreet lettering. Yeah, it was Macy's, all right. Macy's for sure.

One black hand flew out and slammed the door open while the male voice (a cop voice if Eddie had ever heard one, and he had heard many in his time) behind yelled for her to quit it, that was no way out, she was only making things a helluva lot worse for herself, and Eddie caught a bare glimpse of the black woman in the wheelchair in the mirror to the left, and he remembered thinking Jesus, he's got her, all right, but she sure don't look happy about it.

Then the view pivoted and Eddie was looking at himself. The view rushed toward the viewer and he wanted to put up the hand holding the knife to shield his eyes because all at once the sensation of looking through two sets of eyes was too much, too crazy, it was going to drive him crazy if he didn't shut it out, but it all happened too fast for him to have time.

The wheelchair came through the door. It was a tight fit; Eddie heard its hubs squeal on the sides. At the same moment he heard another sound: a thick tearing sound that made him think of some word

(placental)

that he couldn't quite think of because he didn't know he knew it. Then the woman was rolling toward him on the hard-packed sand, and she no longer looked mad as hell—hardly looked like the woman Eddie had glimpsed in the mirror at all, for that matter, but he supposed that wasn't surprising; when you all at once went from a changing-room at Macy's to the seashore of a godforsaken world where some of the lobsters were the size of small Collie dogs, it left you feeling a little winded. That was a subject on which Eddie Dean felt he could personally give testimony.

She rolled about four feet before stopping, and only went that far because of the slope and the gritty pack of the sand. Her hands were no longer pumping the wheels, as they must have been doing (when you wake up with sore shoulders tomorrow you can blame them on Sir Roland, lady, Eddie thought sourly). Instead they went to the arms of the chair and gripped them as she regarded the two men. Behind her, the doorway had already disappeared. Disappeared? That was not quite right. It seemed to fold in on itself, like a piece of film run backward.

This began to happen just as the store dick came slamming through the other, more mundane door—the one between the store and the dressing room. He was coming hard, expecting the shoplifter would have locked the door, and Eddie thought he was going to take one hell of a splat against the far wall, but Eddie was never going to see it happen or not happen. Before the shrinking space where the door between that world and this disappeared entirely, Eddie saw everything

on that side freeze solid.

The movie had become a still photograph.

All that remained now were the dual tracks of the wheel-chair, starting in sandy nowhere and running four feet to where it and its occupant now sat.

"Won't somebody please explain where I am and how I got here?" the woman in the wheelchair asked—almost pleaded.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing, Dorothy," Eddie said. "You ain't in Kansas anymore."

The woman's eyes brimmed with tears. Eddie could see her trying to hold them in but it was no good. She began to sob.

Furious (and disgusted with himself as well), Eddie turned on the gunslinger, who had staggered to his feet. Roland moved, but not toward the weeping Lady.

Instead he went to pick up his knife.

"Tell her!" Eddie shouted. "You brought her, so go on and tell her, man!" And after a moment he added in a lower tone, "And then tell me how come she doesn't remember herself."

4

Roland did not respond. Not at once. He bent, pinched the hilt of the knife between the two remaining fingers of his right hand, transferred it carefully to his left, and slipped it into the scabbard at the side of one gunbelt. He was still trying to grapple with what he had sensed in the Lady's mind. Unlike Eddie, she had fought him, fought him like a cat, from the moment he came forward until they rolled through the door. The fight had begun the moment she sensed him. There had been no lapse, because there had been no surprise. He had experienced it but didn't in the least understand it. No surprise at the invading stranger in her mind, only the instant rage, terror, and the commencement of a battle to shake him free. She hadn't come close to winning that battle—could not, he suspected—but that hadn't kept her from trying like hell. He had felt a woman insane with fear and anger and hate.

He had sensed only darkness in her—this was a mind entombed in a cave-in.

Except—

Except that in the moment they burst through the door-way and separated, he had wished—wished desperately—that he could tarry a moment longer. One moment would have told so much. Because the woman before them now wasn't the woman in whose mind he had been. Being in Eddie's mind had been like being in a room with jittery, sweating walls. Being in the Lady's had been like lying naked in the dark while venomous snakes crawled all over you.

Until the end.

She had changed at the end.

And there had been something else, something he believed was vitally important, but he either could not understand it or remember it. Something like

(a glance)

the doorway itself, only in her mind. Something about

(you broke the forspacial it was you)

some sudden burst of understanding. As at studies, when you finally saw—

"Oh, fuck you," Eddie said disgustedly. "You're nothing but a goddam machine."

He strode past Roland, went to the woman, knelt beside her, and when she put her arms around him, panic-tight, like the arms of a drowning swimmer, he did not

draw away but put his own arms around her and hugged her back.

"It's okay," he said. "I mean, it's not great, but it's okay."

"Where are we?" she wept. "I was sitting home watching TV so I could hear if my friends got out of Oxford alive and now I'm here and I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE HERE IS!"

"Well, neither do I," Eddie said, holding her tighter, beginning to rock her a little, "but I guess we're in it together. I'm from where you're from, little old New York City, and I've been through the same thing—well, a little different, but same principle—and you're gonna be just fine." As an afterthought he added: "As long as you like lobster."

She hugged him and wept and Eddie held her and rocked her and Roland thought, Eddie will be all right now. His brother is dead but he has someone else to take care of so Eddie will be all right now.

But he felt a pang: a deep reproachful hurt in his heart. He was capable of shooting—with his left hand, anyway—of killing, of going on and on, slamming with brutal relentless-ness through miles and years, even dimensions, it seemed, in search of the Tower. He was capable of survival, sometimes even of protection—he had saved the boy Jake from a slow death at the way station, and from sexual consumption by the Oracle at the foot of the mountains—but in the end, he had let Jake die. Nor had this been by accident; he had committed a conscious act of damnation. He watched the two of them, watched Eddie hug her; assure her it was going to be all right. He could not have done that, and now the rue in his heart was joined by stealthy fear.

If you have given up your heart for the Tower, Roland, you have already lost. A heartless creature is a loveless creature, and a loveless creature is a beast.

To be a beast is perhaps bearable, although the man who has become one will surely pay hell's own price in the end, but what if you should gain your object? What if you should, heartless, actually storm the Dark Tower and win it? If there is naught but darkness in your heart, what could you do except degenerate from beast to monster? To gain one's object as a beast would only be bitterly comic, like giving a magnifying glass to an elephaunt. But to gain one's object as a monster . . .

To pay hell is one thing. But do you want to own it?

He thought of Allie, and of the girl who had once waited for him at the window, thought of the tears he had shed over Cuthbert's lifeless corpse. Oh, then he had loved. Yes. Then.

I do want to love! he cried, but although Eddie was also crying a little now with the woman in the wheelchair, the gunslinger's eyes remained as dry as the desert he had crossed to reach this sunless sea.

5

He would answer Eddie's question later. He would do that because he thought Eddie would do well to be on guard. The reason she didn't remember was simple. She wasn't one woman but two. And one of them was dangerous.

6

Eddie told her what he could, glossing over the shoot-out but being truthful

about everything else.

When he was done, she remained perfectly silent for some time, her hands clasped together on her lap.

Little streamlets coursed down from the shallowing mountains, petering out some miles to the east. It was from these that Roland and Eddie had drawn their water as they hiked north. At first Eddie had gotten it because Roland was too weak. Later they had taken turns, always having to go a little further and search a little longer before finding a stream. They grew steadily more listless as the mountains slumped, but the water hadn't made them sick.

So far.

Roland had gone yesterday, and although that made today Eddie's turn, the gunslinger had gone again, shoulder-ing the hide water-skins and walking off without a word. Eddie found this queerly discreet. He didn't want to be touched by the gesture—by anything about Roland, for that matter—and found he was, a little, just the same.

She listened attentively to Eddie, not speaking at all, her eyes fixed on his.

At one moment Eddie would guess she was five years older than he, at another he would guess fifteen. There was one thing he didn't have to guess about: he was falling in love with her.

When he had finished, she sat for a moment without saying anything, now not looking at him but beyond him, looking at the waves which would, at nightfall, bring the lobsters and with their alien, lawyerly questions. He had been particularly careful to describe them. Better for her to be a little scared now than a lot scared when they came out to play. He supposed she wouldn't want to eat them, not after hearing what they had done to Roland's hand and foot, not after she got a good close look at them. But eventually hunger would win out over did-a-chick and dum-a-chum.

Her eyes were far and distant.

"Odetta?" he asked after perhaps five minutes had gone by. She had told him her name. Odetta Holmes. He thought it was a gorgeous name.

She looked back at him, startled out of her reverie. She smiled a little. She said one word.

"No."

He only looked at her, able to think of no suitable reply. He thought he had never understood until that moment how illimitable a simple negative could be.

"I don't understand," he said finally. "What are you no-ing?"

"All this." Odetta swept an arm (she had, he'd noticed, very strong arms—smooth but very strong), indicating the sea, the sky, the beach, the scruffy foothills where the gunslinger was now presumably searching for water (or maybe getting eaten alive by some new and interesting monster, something Eddie didn't really care to think about). Indicating, in short, this entire world.

"I understand how you feel. I had a pretty good case of the unrealities myself at first."

But had he? Looking back, it seemed he had simply accepted, perhaps because he was sick, shaking himself apart in his need for junk.

"You get over it."

"No," she said again. "I believe one of two things has happened, and no matter which one it is, I am still in Oxford, Mississippi. None of this is real."

She went on. If her voice had been louder (or perhaps if he had not been falling in love) it would almost have been a lecture. As it was, it sounded more like

lyric than lecture.

Except, he had to keep reminding himself, bullshit's what it really is, and you have to convince her of that. For her sake.

"I may have sustained a head injury," she said. "They are notorious swingers of axe-handles and billy-clubs in Oxford Town."

Oxford Town.

That produced a faint chord of recognition far back in Eddie's mind. She said the words in a kind of rhythm that he for some reason associated with Henry . . . Henry and wet diapers. Why? What? Didn't matter now.

"You're trying to tell me you think this is all some sort of dream you're having while you're unconscious?"

"Or in a coma," she said. "And you needn't look at me as though you thought it was preposterous, because it isn't. Look here."

She parted her hair carefully on the left, and Eddie could see she wore it to one side not just because she liked the style. The old wound beneath the fall of her hair was scarred and ugly, not brown but a grayish-white.

"I guess you've had a lot of hard luck in your time," he said.

She shrugged impatiently. "A lot of hard luck and a lot of soft living," she said. "Maybe it all balances out. I only showed you because I was in a coma for three weeks when I was five. I dreamed a lot then. I can't remember what the dreams were, but I remember my mamma said they knew I wasn't going to die just as long as I kept talking and it seemed like I kept talking all the time, although she said they couldn't make out one word in a dozen. I do remember that the dreams were very vivid."

She paused, looking around.

"As vivid as this place seems to be. And you, Eddie."

When she said his name his arms prickled. Oh, he had it, all right. Had it bad.

"And him." She shivered. "He seems the most vivid of all."

"We ought to. I mean, we are real, no matter what you think."

She gave him a kind smile. It was utterly without belief.

"How did that happen?" he asked. "That thing on your head?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm just making the point that what has happened once might very well happen again."

"No, but I'm curious."

"I was struck by a brick. It was our first trip north. We came to the town of Elizabeth, New Jersey. We came in the Jim Crow car."

"What's that?"

She looked at him unbelievably, almost scornfully. "Where have you been living, Eddie? In a bomb-shelter?"

"I'm from a different time," he said. "Could I ask how old you are, Odetta?"

"Old enough to vote and not old enough for Social Security."

"Well, I guess that puts me in my place."

"But gently, I hope," she said, and smiled that radiant smile which made his arms prickle.

"I'm twenty-three," he said, "but I was born in 1964—the year you were living in when Roland took you."

"That's rubbish."

"No. I was living in 1987 when he took me."

"Well," she said after a moment. "That certainly adds a great deal to your argument for this as reality, Eddie."

"The Jim Crow car. . . was it where the black people had to stay?"

"The Negroes," she said. "Calling a Negro a black is a trifle rude, don't you think?"

"You'll all be calling yourselves that by 1980 or so," Eddie said. "When I was a kid, calling a black kid a Negro was apt to get you in a fight. It was almost like calling him a nigger."

She looked at him uncertainly for a moment, then shook her head again.

"Tell me about the brick, then."

"My mother's youngest sister was going to be married," Odetta said. "Her name was Sophia, but my mother always called her Sister Blue because it was the color she always fancied. 'Or at least she fancied to fancy it,' was how my mother put it. So I always called her Aunt Blue, even before I met her. It was the most lovely wedding. There was a reception afterward. I remember all the presents." She laughed.

"Presents always look so wonderful to a child, don't they, Eddie?"

He smiled. "Yeah, you got that right. You never forget presents. Not what you got, not what somebody else got, either."

"My father had begun to make money by then, but all I knew is that we were getting ahead. That's what my mother always called it and once, when I told her a little girl I played with had asked if my daddy was rich, my mother told me that was what I was supposed to say if any of my other chums ever asked me that question. That we were getting ahead.

"So they were able to give Aunt Blue a lovely china set, and I remember..."

Her voice faltered. One hand rose to her temple and rubbed absently, as if a headache were beginning there.

"Remember what, Odetta?"

"I remember my mother gave her a for special."

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I've got a headache. It's got my tongue tangled. I don't know why I'm bothering to tell you all this, anyway."

"Do you mind?"

"No. I don't mind. I meant to say mother gave her a special plate. It was white, with delicate blue tracework woven all around the rim." Odetta smiled a little. Eddie didn't think it was an entirely comfortable smile. Something about this memory disturbed her, and the way its immediacy seemed to have taken precedence over the extremely strange situation she had found herself in, a situation which should be claiming all or most of her attention, disturbed him.

"I can see that plate as clearly as I can see you now, Eddie. My mother gave it to Aunt Blue and she cried and cried over it. I think she'd seen a plate like that once when she and my mother were children, only of course their parents could never have afforded such a thing. There was none of them who got any thing for special as kids. After the reception Aunt Blue and her husband left for the Great Smokies on their honeymoon. They went on the train." She looked at Eddie.

"In the Jim Crow car," he said.

"That's right! In the Crow car! In those days that's what Negroes rode in and where they ate. That's what we're trying to change in Oxford Town."

She looked at him, almost surely expecting him to insist she was here, but he was caught in the webwork of his own memory again: wet diapers and those words. Oxford Town. Only suddenly other words came, just a single line, but he could remember Henry singing it over and over until his mother asked if he couldn't

please stop so she could hear Walter Cronkite.

Somebody better investigate soon. Those were the words. Sung over and over by Henry in a nasal monotone. He tried for more but couldn't get it, and was that any real surprise? He could have been no more than three at the time. Somebody better investigate soon. The words gave him a chill.

"Eddie, are you all right?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You shivered."

He smiled. "Donald Duck must have walked over my grave."

She laughed. "Anyway, at least I didn't spoil the wedding. It happened when we were walking back to the railway station. We stayed the night with a friend of Aunt Blue's, and in the morning my father called a taxi. The taxi came almost right away, but when the driver saw we were colored, he drove off like his head was on fire and his ass was catching. Aunt Blue's friend had already gone ahead to the depot with our luggage—there was a lot of it, because we were going to spend a week in New York. I remember my father saying he couldn't wait to see my face light up when the clock in Central Park struck the hour and all the animals danced.

"My father said we might as well walk to the station. My mother agreed just as fast as lickety-split, saying that was a fine idea, it wasn't but a mile and it would be nice to stretch our legs after three days on one train just behind us and half a day on another one just ahead of us. My father said yes, and it was gorgeous weather besides, but I think I knew even at five that he was mad and she was embarrassed and both of them were afraid to call another taxi-cab because the same thing might happen again.

"So we went walking down the street. I was on the inside because my mother was afraid of me getting too close to the traffic. I remember wondering if my daddy meant my face would actually start to glow or something when I saw that clock in Central Park, and if that might not hurt, and that was when the brick came down on my head. Everything went dark for a while. Then the dreams started. Vivid dreams."

She smiled.

"Like this dream, Eddie."

"Did the brick fall, or did someone bomb you?"

"They never found anyone. The police (my mother told me this long after, when I was sixteen or so) found the place where they thought the brick had been, but there were other bricks missing and more were loose. It was just outside the window of a fourth-floor room in an apartment building that had been condemned. But of course there were lots of people staying there just the same. Especially at night."

"Sure," Eddie said.

"No one saw anyone leaving the building, so it went down as an accident. My mother said she thought it had been, but I think she was lying. She didn't even bother trying to tell me what my father thought. They were both still smarting over how the cab-driver had taken one look at us and driven off. It was that more than anything else that made them believe someone had been up there, just looking out, and saw us coming, and decided to drop a brick on the niggers.

"Will your lobster-creatures come out soon?"

"No," Eddie said. "Not until dusk. So one of your ideas is that all of this is a coma-dream like the ones you had when you got bopped by the brick. Only this

time you think it was a billy-club or something."

"Yes."

"What's the other one?"

Odetta's face and voice were calm enough, but her head was filled with an ugly skein of images which all added up to Oxford Town, Oxford Town. How did the song go? Two men killed by the light of the moon,/Somebody better investigate soon.

Not quite right, but it was close. Close.

"I may have gone insane," she said.

7

The first words which came into Eddie's mind were // you think you've gone insane, Odetta, you're nuts.

Brief consideration, however, made this seem an unprofitable line of argument to take.

Instead he remained silent for a time, sitting by her wheelchair, his knees drawn up, his hands holding his wrists.

"Were you really a heroin addict?"

"Am," he said. "It's like being an alcoholic, or 'basing. It's not a thing you ever get over. I used to hear that and go 'Yeah, yeah, right, right,' in my head, you know, but now I understand. I still want it, and I guess part of me will always want it, but the physical part has passed."

"What's 'basing?'" she asked.

"Something that hasn't been invented yet in your when. It's something you do with cocaine, only it's like turning TNT into an A-bomb."

"You did it?"

"Christ, no. Heroin was my thing. I told you."

"You don't seem like an addict," she said.

Eddie actually was fairly spiffy ... if, that was, one ignored the gamy smell arising from his body and clothes (he could rinse himself and did, could rinse his clothes and did, but lacking soap, he could not really wash either). His hair had been short when Roland stepped into his life (the better to sail through customs, my dear, and what a great big joke that had turned out to be), and was a still a respectable length. He shaved every morning, using the keen edge of Roland's knife, gingerly at first, but with increasing confidence. He'd been too young for shaving to be part of his life when Henry left for 'Nam, and it hadn't been any big deal to Henry back then, either; he never grew a beard, but sometimes went three or four days before Mom nagged him into "mowing the stubble." When he came back, however, Henry was a maniac on the subject (as he was on a few others—foot-powder after shower-ing; teeth to be brushed three or four times a day and followed by a chaser of mouthwash; clothes always hung up) and he turned Eddie into a fanatic as well. The stubble was mowed every morning and every evening. Now this habit was deep in his grain, like the others Henry had taught him. Including, of course, the one you took care of with a needle.

"Too clean-cut?" he asked her, grinning.

"Too white," she said shortly, and then was quiet for a moment, looking sternly out at the sea. Eddie was quiet, too. If there was a comeback to something like that, he didn't know what it was.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was very unkind, very unfair, and very unlike me."

"It's all right."



"It's not. It's like a white person saying something like 'Jeez, I never would have guessed you were a nigger' to some-one with a very light skin."

"You like to think of yourself as more fair-minded," Eddie said.

"What we like to think of ourselves and what we really are rarely have much in common, I should think, but yes—I like to think of myself as more fair-minded. So please accept my apology, Eddie."

"On one condition."

"What's that?" she was smiling a little again. That was good. He liked it when he was able to make her smile.

"Give this a fair chance. That's the condition."

"Give what a fair chance?" She sounded slightly amused. Eddie might have bristled at that tone in someone else's voice, might have felt he was getting boned, but with her it was different. With her it was all right. He supposed with her just about anything would have been.

"That there's a third alternative. That this really is hap-pening. I mean ..."

Eddie cleared his throat. "I'm not very good at this philosophical shit, or, you know, metamorphosis or whatever the hell you call it—"

"Do you mean metaphysics?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I think so. But I know you can't go around disbelieving what your senses tell you. Why, if your idea about this all being a dream is right—"

"I didn't say a dream—"

"Whatever you said, that's what it comes down to, isn't it? A false reality?"

If there had been something faintly condescending in her voice a moment ago, it was gone now. "Philosophy and metaphysics may not be your bag, Eddie, but you must have been a hell of a debater in school."

"I was never in debate. That was for gays and hags and wimps. Like chess club. What do you mean, my bag? What's a bag?"

"Just something you like. What do you mean, gays? What are gays?"

He looked at her for a moment, then shrugged. "Homos. Fags. Never mind. We could swap slang all day. It's not getting us anyplace. What I'm trying to say is that if it's all a dream, it could be mine, not yours. You could be a figment of my imagination."

Her smile faltered. "You . . . nobody bopped you."

"Nobody bopped you, either."

Now her smile was entirely gone. "No one that I remember," she corrected with some sharpness.

"Me either!" he said. "You told me they're rough in Oxford. Well, those Customs guys weren't exactly cheery joy when they couldn't find the dope they were after. One of them could have head-bopped me with the butt of his gun. I could be lying in a Bellevue ward right now, dreaming you and Roland while they write their reports, explaining how, while they were interrogating me, I became violent and had to be subdued."

"It's not the same."

"Why? Because you're this intelligent socially active black lady with no legs and I'm just a hype from Co-Op City?" He said it with a grin, meaning it as an amiable jape, but she flared at him.

"I wish you would stop calling me black!"

He sighed. "Okay, but it's gonna take getting used to."

"You should have been on the debate club anyway."

"Fuck," he said, and the turn of her eyes made him realize again that the difference between them was much wider than color; they were speaking to each other from separate islands. The water between was time. Never mind. The word had gotten her attention. "I don't want to debate you. I want to wake you up to the fact that you are awake, that's all."

"I might be able to at least operate provisionally according to the dictates of your third alternative as long as this . . . this situation . . . continued to go on, except for one thing: There's a fundamental difference between what happened to you and what happened to me. So fundamental, so large, that you haven't seen it."

"Then show it to me."

"There is no discontinuity in your consciousness. There is a very large one in mine."

"I don't understand."

"I mean you can account for all of your time," Odetta said. "Your story follows from point to point: the airplane, the incursion by that. . . that... by him— She nodded toward the foothills with clear distaste.

"The stashing of the drugs, the officers who took you into custody, all the rest. It's a fantastic story, it has no missing links.

"As for myself, I arrived back from Oxford, was met by Andrew, my driver, and brought back to my building. I bathed and I wanted sleep—I was getting a very bad headache, and sleep is the only medicine that's any good for the really bad ones. But it was close on midnight, and I thought I would watch the news first. Some of us had been released, but a good many more were still in the jug when we left. I wanted to find out if their cases had been resolved.

"I dried off and put on my robe and went into the living room. I turned on the TV news. The newscaster started talking about a speech Krushchev had just made about the American advisors in Viet Nam. He said, 'We have a film report from—' and then he was gone and I was rolling down this beach. You say you saw me in some sort of magic doorway which is now gone, and that I was in Macy's, and that I was stealing. All of this is preposterous enough, but even if it was so, I could find something better to steal than costume jewelry. I don't wear jewelry."

"You better look at your hands again, Odetta," Eddie said quietly.

For a very long time she looked from the "diamond" on her left pinky, too large and vulgar to be anything but paste, to the large opal on the third finger of her right hand, which was too large and vulgar to be anything but real.

"None of this is happening," she repeated firmly.

"You sound like a broken record!" He was genuinely angry for the first time.

"Every time someone pokes a hole in your neat little story, you just retreat to that 'none of this is happening' shit. You have to wise up, 'Delta.'"

"Don't call me that! I hate that!" she burst out so shrilly that Eddie recoiled.

"Sorry. Jesus! I didn't know."

"I went from night to day, from undressed to dressed, from my living room to this deserted beach. And what really happened was that some big-bellied redneck deputy hit me upside the head with a club and that is all!"

"But your memories don't stop in Oxford," he said softly.

"W-What?" Uncertain again. Or maybe seeing and not wanting to. Like with the rings.

"If you got whacked in Oxford, how come your memories don't stop there?"

"There isn't always a lot of logic to things like this." She was rubbing her temples again. "And now, if it's all the same to you, Eddie, I'd just as soon end the conversation. My head-ache is back. It's quite bad."

"I guess whether or not logic figures in all depends on what you want to believe. I saw you in Macy's, Odetta. I saw you stealing. You say you don't do things like that, but you also told me you don't wear jewelry. You told me that even though you'd looked down at your hands several times while we were talking. Those rings were there then, but it was as if you couldn't see them until I called your attention to them and made you see them."

"I don't want to talk about it!" she shouted. "My head hurts!"

"All right. But you know where you lost track of time, and it wasn't in Oxford."

"Leave me alone," she said dully.

Eddie saw the gunslinger toiling his way back with two full water-skins, one tied around his waist and the other slung over his shoulders. He looked very tired.

"I wish I could help you," Eddie said, "but to do that, I guess I'd have to be real."

He stood by her for a moment, but her head was bowed, the tips of her fingers steadily massaging her temples.

Eddie went to meet Roland.

8

"Sit down." Eddie took the bags. "You look all in."

"I am. I'm getting sick again."

Eddie looked at the gunslinger's flushed cheeks and brow, his cracked lips, and nodded. "I hoped it wouldn't happen, but I'm not that surprised, man. You didn't bat for the cycle. Balazar didn't have enough Keflex."

"I don't understand you."

"If you don't take a penicillin drug long enough, you don't kill the infection.

You just drive it underground. A few days go by and it comes back. We'll need more, but at least there's a door to go. In the meantime you'll just have to take it easy." But Eddie was thinking unhappily of Odetta's missing legs and the longer and longer treks it took to find water. He wondered if Roland could have picked a worse time to have a relapse. He supposed it was possible; he just didn't see how.

"I have to tell you something about Odetta."

"That's her name?"

"Uh-huh."

"It's very lovely," the gunslinger said.

"Yeah. I thought so, too. What isn't so lovely is the way she feels about this place. She doesn't think she's here."

"I know. And she doesn't like me much, does she?"

No, Eddie thought, but that doesn't keep her from think-ing you're one booger of a hallucination. He didn't say it, only nodded.

"The reasons are almost the same," the gunslinger said. "She's not the woman I brought through, you see. Not at all."

Eddie stared, then suddenly nodded, excited. That blurred glimpse in the mirror

. . . that snarling face . . . the man was right. Jesus Christ, of course he was! That hadn't been Odetta at all.

Then he remembered the hands which had gone pawing carelessly through the scarves and had just as carelessly gone about the business of stuffing the junk jewelry into her big purse—almost, it had seemed, as if she wanted to be caught. The rings had been there.

Same rings.

But that doesn't necessarily mean the same hands, he thought wildly, but that would only hold for a second. He had studied her hands. They were the same, long-fingered and delicate.

"No," the gunslinger continued. "She is not." His blue eyes studied Eddie carefully.

"Her hands—"

"Listen," the gunslinger said, "and listen carefully. Our lives may depend on it—mine because I'm getting sick again, and yours because you have fallen in love with her."

Eddie said nothing.

"She is two women in the same body. She was one woman when I entered her, and another when I returned here."

Now Eddie could say nothing.

"There was something else, something strange, but either I didn't understand it or I did and it's slipped away. It seemed important."

Roland looked past Eddie, looked to the beached wheel-chair, standing alone at the end of its short track from no-where. Then he looked back at Eddie.

"I understand very little of this, or how such a thing can be, but you must be on your guard. Do you understand that?"

"Yes." Eddie's lungs felt as if they had very little wind in them. He understood—or had, at least, a moviegoer's under-standing of the sort of thing the gunslinger was speaking of—but he didn't have the breath to explain, not yet. He felt as if Roland had kicked all his breath out of him.

"Good. Because the woman I entered on the other side of the door was as deadly as those lobster-things that come out at night."

#### CHAPTER 4 DETTA ON THE OTHER SIDE

1

You must be on your guard, the gunslinger said, and Eddie had agreed, but the gunslinger knew Eddie didn't know what he was talking about; the whole back half of Eddie's mind, where survival is or isn't, didn't get the message.

The gunslinger saw this.

It was a good thing for Eddie he did.

2

In the middle of the night, Detta Walker's eyes sprang open. They were full of

starlight and clear intelligence.

She remembered everything: how she had fought them, how they had tied her into her chair, how they had taunted her, calling her niggerbitch, niggerbitch.

She remembered monsters coming out of the waves, and she remembered how one of the men—the older—had killed one of them. The younger had built a fire and cooked it and then had offered her smoking monster-meat on a stick, grin-ning. She remembered spitting at his face, remembered his grin turning into an angry honky scowl. He had hit her upside the face, and told her Well, that's all right, you'll come around, niggerbitch. Wait and see if you don't. Then he and the Really Bad Man—had laughed and the Really Bad Man had brought out a haunch of beef which he spitted and slowly cooked over the fire on the beach of this alien place to which they had brought her.

The smell of the slowly roasting beef had been seductive, but she had made no sign. Even when the younger one had waved a chunk of it near her face, chanting Bite for it, nigger-bitch, go on and bite for it, she had sat like stone, holding herself in.

Then she had slept, and now she was awake, and the ropes they had tied her with were gone. She was no longer in her chair but lying on one blanket and under another, far above the high-tide line, where the lobster-things still wandered and questioned and snatched the odd unfortunate gull out of the air.

She looked to her left and saw nothing.

She looked to her right and saw two sleeping men wrapped in two piles of blankets. The younger one was closer, and the Really Bad Man had taken off his gunbelts and laid them by him.

The guns were still in them.

You made a bad mistake, mahfah, Delta thought, and rolled to her right. The gritty crunch and squeak of her body on the sand was inaudible under the wind, the waves, the questioning creatures. She crawled slowly along the sand (like one of the lobstrosities herself), her eyes glittering.

She reached the gunbelts and pulled one of the guns.

It was very heavy, the grip smooth and somehow independently deadly in her hand. The heaviness didn't bother her. She had strong arms, did Delta Walker.

She crawled a little further.

The younger man was no more than a snoring rock, but the Really Bad Man stirred a little in his sleep and she froze with a snarl tattooed on her face until he quieted again.

He be one sneaky sumbitch. You check, Delta. You check, be sho.

She found the worn chamber release, tried to shove it forward, got nothing, and pulled it instead. The chamber swung open.

Loaded! Fucker be loaded! You goan do this young cocka-de-walk first, and dat Really Bad Man be wakin up and you goan give him one big grin—smile honeychile so I kin see where you is—and den you goan clean his clock somethin righteous.

She swung the chamber back, started to pull the hammer . . . and then waited.

When the wind kicked up a gust, she pulled the hammer to full cock.

Delta pointed Roland's gun at Eddie's temple.

3

The gunslinger watched all this from one half-open eye. The fever was back, but not bad yet, not so bad that he must mistrust himself. So he waited, that one

half-open eye the finger on the trigger of his body, the body which had always been his revolver when there was no revolver at hand.

She pulled the trigger.

Click.

Of course click.

When he and Eddie had come back with the waterskins from their palaver, Odetta Holmes had been deeply asleep in her wheelchair, slumped to one side. They had made her the best bed they could on the sand and carried her gently from her wheelchair to the spread blankets. Eddie had been sure she would awake, but Roland knew better.

He had killed, Eddie had built a fire, and they had eaten, saving a portion aside for Odetta in the morning.

Then they had talked, and Eddie had said something which burst upon Roland like a sudden flare of lightning. It was too bright and too brief to be total understanding, but he saw much, the way one may discern the lay of the land in a single lucky stroke of lightning.

He could have told Eddie then, but did not. He understood that he must be Eddie's Cort, and when one of Cort's pupils was left hurt and bleeding by some unexpected blow, Cort's response had always been the same: A child doesn't understand a hammer until he's mashed his finger at a nail. Get up and stop whining, maggot! You have forgotten the face of your father!

So Eddie had fallen asleep, even though Roland had told him he must be on his guard, and when Roland was sure they both slept (he had waited longer for the Lady, who could, he thought, be sly), he had reloaded his guns with spent casings, unstrapped them (that caused a pang), and put them by Eddie.

Then he waited.

One hour; two; three.

Halfway through the fourth hour, as his tired and feverish body tried to drowse, he sensed rather than saw the Lady come awake and came fully awake himself. He watched her roll over. He watched her turn her hands into claws and pull herself along the sand to where his gun-belts lay. He watched her take one of them out, come closer to Eddie, and then pause, her head cocking, her nostrils swelling and contracting, doing more than smelling the air; tasting it.

Yes. This was the woman he had brought across.

When she glanced toward the gunslinger he did more than feign sleep, because she would have sensed sham; he went to sleep. When he sensed her gaze shift away he awoke and opened that single eye again. He saw her begin to raise the gun—she did this with less effort than Eddie had shown the first time Roland saw him do the same thing—and point it toward Eddie's head. Then she paused, her face filled with an inexpressible cunning.

In that moment she reminded him of Marten.

She fiddled with the cylinder, getting it wrong at first, then swinging it open. She looked at the heads of the shells. Roland tensed, waiting first to see if she would know the firing pins had already been struck, waiting next to see if she would turn the gun, look into the other end of the cylinder, and see there was only emptiness there instead of lead (he had thought of loading the guns with cartridges which had already mis-fired, but only briefly; Cort had taught them that every gun is ultimately ruled by Old Man Splitfoot, and a cartridge which misfires once may not do so a second time). If she did that, he would spring at once.

But she swung the cylinder back in, began to cock the hammer . . . and then paused again. Paused for the wind to mask the single low click.

He thought: Here is another. God, she's evil, this one, and she's legless, but she's a gunslinger as surely as Eddie is one.

He waited with her.

The wind gusted.

She pulled the hammer to full cock and placed it half an inch from Eddie's temple. With a grin that was a ghoulish grimace, she pulled the trigger.

Click.

He waited.

She pulled it again. And again. And again.

Click-Click-Click.

"MahFAH!" she screamed, and reversed the gun with liquid grace.

Roland coiled but did not leap. A child doesn't understand a hammer until he's mashed his finger at a nail.

If she kills him, she kills you.

Doesn't matter, the voice of Cort answered inexorably.

Eddie stirred. And his reflexes were not bad; he moved fast enough to avoid being driven unconscious or killed. Instead of coming down on the vulnerable temple, the heavy gun-butt cracked the side of his jaw.

"What. . . Jesus!"

"MAHFAH! HONKY MAHFUH!" Delta screamed, and Roland saw her raise the gun a second time. And even though she was legless and Eddie was rolling away, it was as much as he dared. If Eddie hadn't learned the lesson now, he never would. The next time the gunslinger told Eddie to be on his guard, Eddie would be, and besides—the bitch was quick. It would not be wise to depend further than this on either Eddie's quickness or the Lady's infirmity.

He uncoiled, flying over Eddie and knocking her back-ward, ending up on top of her.

"You want it, mahfah?" she screamed at him, simultaneously rolling her crotch against his groin and raising the arm which still held the gun above his head.

"You want it? I goan give you what you want, sho!"

"Eddie!" he shouted again, not just yelling now but commanding. For a moment Eddie just went on squalling there, eyes wide, blood dripping from his jaw (it had already begun to swell), staring, eyes wide. Move, can't you move? he thought, or is it that you don't want to? His strength was fading now, and the next time she brought that heavy gunbutt down she was going to break his arm with it... that was if he got his arm up in time. If he didn't, she was going to break his head with it.

Then Eddie moved. He caught the gun on the downswing and she shrieked, turning toward him, biting at him like a vampire, cursing him in a gutter patois so darkly southern that even Eddie couldn't understand it; to Roland it sounded as if the woman had suddenly begun to speak in a foreign language. But Eddie was able to yank the gun out of her hand and with the impending bludgeon gone, Roland was able to pin her.

She did not quit even then but continued to buck and heave and curse, sweat standing out all over her dark face.

Eddie stared, mouth opening and closing like the mouth of a fish. He touched tentatively at his jaw, winced, pulled his fingers back, examined them and the blood on them.

She was screaming that she would kill them both; they could try and rape her but she would kill them with her cunt, they would see, that was one bad son of a bitching cave with teeth around the entrance and if they wanted to try and explore it they would find out.

"What in the hell—" Eddie said stupidly.

"One of my gunbelts," the gunslinger panted harshly at him. "Get it. I'm going to roll her over on top of me and you're going to grab her arms and tie her hands behind her."

"You ain't NEVAH!" Delta shrieked, and sunfished her legless body with such sudden force that she almost bucked Roland off. He felt her trying to bring the remainder of her right thigh up again and again, wanting to drive it into his balls.

"I... I... she ..."

"Move, God curse your father's face!" Roland roared, and at last Eddie moved.

4

They almost lost control of her twice during the tying and binding. But Eddie was at last able to slip-knot one of Roland's gunbelts around her wrists when Roland—using all his force—finally brought them together behind her (all the time drawing back from her lunging bites like a mongoose from a snake; the bites he avoided but before Eddie had fin-ished, the gunslinger was drenched with spittle) and then Eddie dragged her off, holding the short leash of the makeshift slip-knot to do it. He did not want to hurt this thrashing screaming cursing thing. It was uglier than the lobstrosities by far because of the greater intelligence which informed it, but he knew it could also be beautiful. He did not want to harm the other person the vessel held somewhere inside it (like a live dove deep inside one of the secret compartments in a magi-cian's magic box).

Odetta Holmes was somewhere inside that screaming screeching thing.

5

Although his last mount—a mule—had died too long ago to remember, the gunslinger still had a piece of its tether-rope (which, in turn, had once been a fine gunslinger's lariat). They used this to bind her in her wheelchair, as she had imagined (or falsely remembered, and in the end they both came to the same thing, didn't they?) they had done already. Then they drew away from her. If not for the crawling lobster-things, Eddie would have gone down to the water and washed his hands.

"I feel like I'm going to vomit," he said in a voice that jig-jagged up and down the scale like the voice of an adoles-cent boy.

"Why don't you go on and eat each other's COCKS?" the struggling thing in the chair screeched. "Why don't you jus go on and do dat if you fraid of a black woman's cunny? You just go on! Sho! Suck on yo each one's candles! Do it while you got a chance, cause Delta Walker goan get outen dis chair and cut dem skinny ole white candles off and feed em to those walkm buzzsaws down there!"

"She's the woman I was in. Do you believe me now?"

"I believed you before," Eddie said. "I told you that."

"You believed you believed. You believed on the top of your mind. Do you believe



it all the way down now? All the way to the bottom?"

Eddie looked at the shrieking, convulsing thing in the chair and then looked away, white except for the slash on his jaw, which was still dripping a little. That side of his face was beginning to look a little like a balloon.

"Yes," he said. "God, yes."

"This woman is a monster."

Eddie began to cry.

The gunslinger wanted to comfort him, could not com-mit such a sacrilege (he remembered Jake too well), and walked off into the dark with his new fever burning and aching inside him.

6

Much earlier on that night, while Odetta still slept, Eddie said he thought he might understand what was wrong with her. Might. The gunslinger asked what he meant.

"She could be a schizophrenic."

Roland only shook his head. Eddie explained what he understood of schizophrenia, gleanings from such films as *The Three Faces of Eve* and various TV programs (mostly the soap operas he and Henry had often watched while stoned). Roland had nodded. Yes. The disease Eddie described sounded about right. A woman with two faces, one light and one dark. A face like the one the man in black had shown him on the fifth Tarot card.

"And they don't know—these schizophrenes—that they have another?"

"No," Eddie said. "But ..." He trailed off, moodily watching the lobstrosities crawl and question, question and crawl.

"But what?"

"I'm no shrink," Eddie said, "so I don't really know—"

"Shrink? What is a shrink?"

Eddie tapped his temple. "A head-doctor. A doctor for your mind. They're really called psychiatrists."

Roland nodded. He liked shrink better. Because this Lady's mind was too large. Twice as large as it needed to be.

"But I think schizos almost always know something is wrong with them," Eddie said. "Because there are blanks. Maybe I'm wrong, but I always got the idea that they were usually two people who thought they had partial amnesia, because of the blank spaces in their memories when the other personality was in control. She . . . she says she remembers everything. She really thinks she remembers everything."

"I thought you said she didn't believe any of this was happening."

"Yeah," Eddie said, "but forget that for now. I'm trying to say that, no matter what she believes, what she remembers goes right from her living room where she was sitting in her bathrobe watching the midnight news to here, with no break at all. She doesn't have any sense that some other person took over between then and when you grabbed her in Macy's. Hell, that might have been the next day or even weeks later. I know it was still winter, because most of the shoppers in that store were wearing coats—"

The gunslinger nodded. Eddie's perceptions were sharp-ening. That was good. He had missed the boots and scarves, the gloves sticking out of coat pockets, but it was still a start.

"—but otherwise it's impossible to tell how long Odetta was that other woman because she doesn't know. I think she's in a situation she's never been in before, and her way of protecting both sides is this story about getting cracked over the head."

Roland nodded.

"And the rings. Seeing those really shook her up. She tried not to show it, but it showed, all right."

Roland asked: "If these two women don't know they exist in the same body, and if they don't even suspect that something may be wrong, if each has her own separate chain of memories, partly real but partly made up to fit the times the other is there, what are we to do with her? How are we even to live with her?"

Eddie had shrugged. "Don't ask me. It's your problem. You're the one who says you need her. Hell, you risked your neck to bring her here." Eddie thought about this for a minute, remembered squatting over Roland's body with Roland's knife held just above the gunslinger's throat, and laughed abruptly and without humor. LITERALLY risked your neck, man, he thought.

A silence fell between them. Odetta had by then been breathing quietly. As the gunslinger was about to reiterate his warning for Eddie to be on guard and announce (loud enough for the Lady to hear, if she was only shamming) that he was going to turn in, Eddie said the thing which lighted Roland's mind in a single sudden glare, the thing which made him understand at least part of what he needed so badly to know.

At the end, when they came through.

She had changed at the end.

And he had seen something, some thing—

"Tell you what," Eddie said, moodily stirring the remains of the fire with a split claw from this night's kill, "when you brought her through, I felt like I was a schizo."

"Why?"

Eddie thought, then shrugged. It was too hard to explain, or maybe he was just too tired. "It's not important."

"Why?"

Eddie looked at Roland, saw he was asking a serious question for a serious reason—or thought he was—and took a minute to think back. "It's really hard to describe, man. It was looking in that door. That's what freaked me out. When you see someone move in that door, it's like you're moving with them. You know what I'm talking about."

Roland nodded.

"Well, I watched it like it was a movie—never mind, it's not important—until the very end. Then you turned her toward this side of the doorway and for the first time I was looking at myself. It was like ..." He groped and could find nothing.

"I dunno. It should have been like looking in a mirror, I guess, but it wasn't, because . . . because it was like looking at another person. It was like being turned inside out. Like being in two places at the same time. Shit, I don't know."

But the gunslinger was thunderstruck. That was what he had sensed as they came through; that was what had happened to her, no, not just her, them: for a moment Detta and Odetta had looked at each other, not the way one would look at her reflection in a mirror but as separate people; the mirror became a windowpane and for a moment Odetta had seen Detta and Detta had seen Odetta and had been

equally horror-struck.

They each know, the gunslinger thought grimly. They may not have known before, but they do now. They can try to hide it from themselves, but for a moment they saw, they knew, and that knowing must still be there.

"Roland?"

"What?"

"Just wanted to make sure you hadn't gone to sleep with your eyes open. Because for a minute you looked like you were, you know, long ago and far away."

"If so, I'm back now," the gunslinger said. "I'm going to turn in. Remember what I said, Eddie: be on your guard."

"I'll watch," Eddie said, but Roland knew that, sick or not, he would have to be the one to do the watching tonight.

Everything else had followed from that.

7

Following the ruckus Eddie and Detta Walker eventually went to sleep again (she did not so much fall asleep as drop into an exhausted state of unconsciousness in her chair, lol-ling to one side against the restraining ropes).

The gunslinger, however, lay wakeful.

I will have to bring the two of them to battle, he thought, but he didn't need one of Eddie's "shrinks" to tell him that such a battle might be to the death.

If the bright one, Odetta, were to win that battle, all might yet be well. If the dark one were to win it, all would surely be lost with her.

Yet he sensed that what really needed doing was not killing but joining. He had already recognized much that would be of value to him—them—in Detta Walker's gutter toughness, and he wanted her—but he wanted her under control. There was a long way to go. Detta thought he and Eddie were monsters of some species she called Honk Mafahs. That was only dangerous delusion, but there would be real monsters along the way—the lobstrosities were not the first, nor would they be the last. The fight-until-you-drop woman he had entered and who had come out of hiding again tonight might come in very handy in a fight against such monsters, if she could be tempered by Odetta Holmes's calm humanity—especially now, with him short two fingers, almost out of bullets, and growing more fever.

But that is a step ahead. I think if I can make them acknowledge each other, that would bring them into confrontation. How may it be done?

He lay awake all that long night, thinking, and although he felt the fever in him grow, he found no answer to his question.

8

Eddie woke up shortly before daybreak, saw the gun-slinger sitting near the ashes of last night's fire with his blanket wrapped around him Indian-fashion, and joined him.

"How do you feel?" Eddie asked in a low voice. The Lady still slept in her crisscrossing of ropes, although she occasionally jerked and muttered and moaned.

"All right."

Eddie gave him an appraising glance. "You don't look all right."

"Thank you, Eddie," the gunslinger said dryly.

"You're shivering."

"It will pass."

The Lady jerked and moaned again—this time a word that was almost understandable. It might have been Oxford.

"God, I hate to see her tied up like that," Eddie mur-mured. "Like a goddam calf in a barn."

"She'll wake soon. Mayhap we can unloose her when she does."

It was the closest either of them came to saying out loud that when the Lady in the chair opened her eyes, the calm, if slightly puzzled gaze of Odetta Holmes might greet them.

Fifteen minutes later, as the first sunrays struck over the hills, those eyes did open—but what the men saw was not the calm gaze of Odetta Holmes but the mad glare of Delta Walker.

"How many times you done rape me while I was buzzed out?" she asked. "My cunt feel all slick an tallowy, like some-body done been at it with a couple them little bitty white candles you graymeat mahfahs call cocks."

Roland sighed.

"Let's get going," he said, and gained his feet with a grimace.

"I ain't goan nowhere wit choo, mahfah," Delta spat.

"Oh yes you are," Eddie said. "Dreadfully sorry, my dear."

"Where you think I'm goan?"

"Well," Eddie said, 'what was behind Door Number One wasn't so hot, and what was behind Door Number Two was even worse, so now, instead of quitting like sane people, we're going to go right on ahead and check out Door Number Three. The way things have been going, I think it's likely to be something like Godzilla or Ghidra the Three-Headed Mon-ster, but I'm an optimist. I'm still hoping for the stainless steel cookware."

"I ain't goan."

"You're going, all right," Eddie said, and walked behind her chair. She began struggling again, but the gunslinger had made these knots, and her struggles only drew them lighter. Soon enough she saw this and ceased. She was full of poison but far from stupid. But she looked back over her shoulder at Eddie with a grin which made him recoil a little. It seemed to him the most evil expression he had ever seen on a human face.

"Well, maybe I be goan on a little way," she said, "but maybe not s'far's you think, white boy. And sure-God not s'fast's you think."

"What do you mean?"

Thai leering, over-the-shoulder grin again.

"You find out, while boy." Her eyes, mad but cogent, shifted briefly to the gunslinger. "You bofe be findin dat out."

Eddie wrapped his hands around the bicycle grips at the ends of the push-handles on the back of her wheelchair and they began north again, now leaving not only footprints but the twin tracks of the Lady's chair as they moved up the seemingly endless beach.

9

The day was a nightmare.

It was hard to calculate distance travelled when you were moving along a landscape which varied so little, but Eddie knew their progress had slowed to a

crawl.

And he knew who was responsible.

Oh yeah.

You bofe befindin dat out, Delta had said, and they hadn't been on the move more than half an hour before the finding out began.

Pushing.

That was the first thing. Pushing the wheelchair up a beach of fine sand would have been as impossible as driving a car through deep unplowed snow. This beach, with its gritty, marly surface, made moving the chair possible but far from easy. It would roll along smoothly enough for awhile, crunch-ing over shells and popping little pebbles to either side of its hard rubber tires . . . and then it would hit a dip where finer sand had drifted, and Eddie would have to shove, grunting, to get it and its solid unhelpful passenger through it. The sand sucked greedily at the wheels. You had to simultaneously push and throw your weight against the handles of the chair in a downward direction, or it and its bound occupant would tumble over face-first onto the beach.

Delta would cackle as he tried to move her without upending her. "You havin a good time back dere, honey-chile?" she asked each time the chair ran into one of these drybogs.

When the gunslinger moved over to help, Eddie mo-tioned him away. "You'll get your chance," he said. "We'll switch off." But I think my turns are going to be a hell of a lot longer than his, a voice in his head spoke up. The way he looks, he's going to have his hands full just keeping himself moving before much longer, let alone moving the woman in this chair. No sir, Eddie, I'm afraid this Bud's for you. It's God's revenge, you know it? All those years you spent as a junkie, and guess what? You're finally the pusher!

He uttered a short out-of-breath laugh.

"What's so funny, white boy?" Delta asked, and although Eddie thought she meant to sound sarcastic, it came out sounding just a tiny bit angry.

Ain't supposed to be any laughs in this for me, he thought. None at all. Not as far as she's concerned.

"You wouldn't understand, babe. Just let it lie."

"I be lettin you lie before this be all over," she said. "Be tellin you and yo bad-ass buddy there lie in pieces all ovah dis beach. Sho. Meantime you better save yo breaf to do yo pushin with. You already sound like you gettin a little sho't winded."

"Well, you talk for both of us, then," Eddie pan led. "You never seem lo run out of wind."

"I goan break wind, graymeal! Goan break it ovah yo dead face!"

"Promises, promises." Eddie shoved the chair out of the sand and onto relatively easier going—for awhile, at least. The sun was not yet fully up, but he had already worked up a sweat.

This is going to be an amusing and informative day, he thought. I can see that already.

Slopping.

That was the next thing.

They had stuck a firm stretch of beach. Eddie pushed the chair along faster, thinking vaguely that if he could keep this bit of extra speed, he might be able lo drive right through the next sandtrap he happened to strike on pure impetus. All at once the chair slopped. Slopped dead. The crossbar on the back hit

Eddie's chest with a thump. He grunted. Roland looked around, but not even the gunslinger's cal-quick reflexes could stop the Lady's chair from going over exactly as it had threatened to do in each of the sandtrap. It went and Delia went with it, tied and helpless but cackling wildly. She still was when Roland and Eddie finally managed to right the chair again. Some of the ropes had drawn so tight they must be culling cruelly into her flesh, cutting off the circulation to her extremities; her forehead was slashed and blood trickled into her eyebrows. She went on cackling just the same.

The men were both gasping, out of breath, by the time the chair was on its wheels again. The combined weight of it and the woman in it must have totaled two hundred and fifty pounds, most of it chair. It occurred to Eddie that if the gunslinger had snatched Delta from his own when, 1987, the chair might have weighed as much as sixty pounds less.

Detta giggled, snorted, blinked blood out of her eyes.

"Looky here, you boys done opsot me," she said.

"Call your lawyer," Eddie muttered. "Sue us."

"An got yoselfs all tuckered out gittin me back on top agin. Must have taken you ten minutes, too."

The gunslinger took a piece of his shirt—enough of it was gone now so the rest didn't much matter—and reached forward with his left hand to mop the blood away from the cut on her forehead. She snapped at him, and from the savage click those teeth made when they came together, Eddie thought that, if Roland had been only one instant slower in drawing back, Detta Walker would have evened up the number of fingers on his hands for him again.

She cackled and stared at him with meanly merry eyes, but the gunslinger saw fear hidden far back in those eyes. She was afraid of him. Afraid because he was The Really Bad Man.

Why was he The Really Bad Man? Maybe because, on some deeper level, she sensed what he knew about her.

"Almos' got you, graymeat," she said. "Almos' got you that time." And cackled, witchlike.

"Hold her head," the gunslinger said evenly. "She bites like a weasel."

Eddie held it while the gunslinger carefully wiped the wound clean. It wasn't wide and didn't look deep, but the gunslinger took no chances; he walked slowly down to the water, soaked the piece of shirting in the salt water, and then came back.

She began to scream as he approached.

"Doan you be touchin me wid dat thing! Doan you be touchin me wid no water from where them poison things come from! Git it away! Git it away!"

"Hold her head," Roland said in the same even voice. She was whipping it from side to side. "I don't want to take any chances."

Eddie held it... and squeezed it when she tried to shake free. She saw he meant business and immediately became still, showing no more fear of the damp rag. It had been only sham, after all.

She smiled at Roland as he bathed the cut, carefully washing out the last clinging particles of grit.

"In fact, you look mo than jest tuckered out," Delta observed. "You look sick, graymeat. I don't think you ready fo no long trip. I don't think you ready fo nuthin like dat."

Eddie examined the chair's rudimentary controls. It had an emergency hand-brake

which locked both wheels. Delta had worked her right hand over there, had wailed patiently until she thought Eddie was going fast enough, and then she had yanked the brake, purposely spilling herself over. Why? To slow them down, that was all. There was no reason to do such a thing, but a woman like Delia, Eddie thought, needed no reasons. A woman like Delia was perfectly willing to do such things out of sheer meanness.

Roland loosened her bonds a bit so the blood could flow more freely, then lied her hand firmly away from the brake.

"That be all right, Mister Man," Delia said, offering him a bright smile filled with too many teeth. "That be all right jest the same. There be other ways to slow you boys down. All sorts of ways."

"Let's go," the gunslinger said tonelessly.

"You all right, man?" Eddie asked. The gunslinger looked very pale.

"Yes. Let's go."

They started up the beach again.

10

The gunslinger insisted on pushing for an hour, and Eddie gave way to him reluctantly. Roland got her through the first sandtrap, but Eddie had to pitch in and help get the wheelchair out of the second. The gunslinger was gasping for air, sweat standing out on his forehead in large beads.

Eddie let him go on a little further, and Roland was quite adept at weaving his way around the places where the sand was loose enough to bog the wheels, but the chair finally became mired again and Eddie could bear only a few moments of watching Roland struggle to push it free, gasping, chest heaving, while the witch (for so Eddie had come to think of her) howled with laughter and actually threw her body back-wards in the chair to make the task that much more difficult—and then he shouldered the gunslinger aside and heaved the chair out of the sand with one angry lurching lunge. The chair tottered and now he saw/sensed her shifting forward as much as the ropes would allow, doing this with a weird prescience at the exactly proper moment, trying to topple herself again.

Roland threw his weight on the back of the chair next to Eddie's and it settled back.

Detta looked around and gave them a wink of such ob-scene conspiracy that Eddie felt his arms crawl up in gooseflesh.

"You almost opsot me agin, boys," she said. "You want to look out for me, now. I ain't nuthin but a old crippled lady, so you want to have a care for me now."

She laughed . . . laughed fit to split.

Although Eddie cared for the woman that was the other part of her—was near to loving her just on the basis of the brief time he had seen her and spoken with her—he felt his hands itch to close around her windpipe and choke that laugh, choke it until she could never laugh again.

She peered around again, saw what he was thinking as if it had been printed on him in red ink, and laughed all the harder. Her eyes dared him. Go on, graymeat. Go on. You want to do it? Go on and do it.

In other words, don't just tip the chair; tip the woman, Eddie thought. Tip her over for good. That's what she wants. For Detta, being killed by a white man may be the only real goal she has in life.

"Come on," he said, and began pushing again. "We are gonna tour the seacoast, sweet thang, like it or not." "Fuck you," she spat.  
"Cram it, babe," Eddie responded pleasantly. The gunslinger walked beside him, head down.

11

They came to a considerable outcropping of rocks when the sun said it was about eleven and here they stopped for nearly an hour, taking the shade as the sun climbed toward the roofpeak of the day. Eddie and the gunslinger ate leftovers from the previous night's kill. Eddie offered a portion to Delta, who again refused, telling him she knew what they wanted to do, and if they wanted to do it, they best to do it with their bare hands and stop trying to poison her. That, she said, was the coward's way.

Eddie's right, the gunslinger mused. This woman has made her own chain of memories. She knows everything that happened to her last night, even though she was really fast asleep.

She believed they had brought her pieces of meat which smelled of death and putrescence, had taunted her with it while they themselves ate salted beef and drank some sort of beer from flasks. She believed they had, every now and then, held pieces of their own untainted supper out to her, drawing it away at the last moment when she snatched at it with her teeth—and laughing while they did it, of course. In the world (or at least in the mind) of Delta Walker, Honk Mahfahs only did two things to brown women: raped them or laughed at them. Or both at the same time.

It was almost funny. Eddie Dean had last seen beef during his ride in the sky-carriage, and Roland had seen none since the last of his jerky was eaten, Gods alone knew how long ago. As far as beer ... he cast his mind back.

Tull.

There had been beer in Tull. Beer and beef.

God, it would be good to have a beer. His throat ached and it would be so good to have a beer to cool that ache. Better even than the astin from Eddie's world.

They drew off a distance from her.

"Ain't I good nough cump'ny for white boys like you?" she cawed after them. "Or did you jes maybe want to have a pull on each other one's little bitty white candle?"

She threw her head back and screamed laughter that frightened the gulls up, crying, from the rocks where they had been met in convention a quarter of a mile away.

The gunslinger sat with his hands dangling between his knees, thinking. Finally he raised his head and told Eddie, "I can only understand about one word in every ten she says."

"I'm way ahead of you," Eddie replied. "I'm getting at least two in every three. Doesn't matter. Most of it comes back to honky mahfah."

Roland nodded. "Do many of the dark-skinned people talk that way where you come from? Her other didn't."

Eddie shook his head and laughed. "No. And I'll tell you something sort of funny—at least I think it's sort of funny, but maybe that's just because there isn't all that much to laugh at out here. It's not real. It's not real and she doesn't even know it—Roland looked at him and said nothing.



"Remember when you washed off her forehead, how she pretended she was scared of the water?"

"Yes."

"You knew she was pretending?"

"Not at first, but quite soon."

Eddie nodded. "That was an act, and she knew it was an act. But she's a pretty good actress and she fooled both of us for a few seconds. The way she's talking is an act, too. But it's not as good. It's so stupid, so goddam hokey!"

"You believe she pretends well only when she knows she's doing it?"

"Yes. She sounds like a cross between the darkies in this book called Mandingo I read once and Butterfly McQueen in Gone with the Wind. I know you don't know those names, but what I mean is she talks like a cliché. Do you know that word?"

"It means what is always said or believed by people who think only a little or not at all."

"Yeah. I couldn't have said it half so good."

"Ain' t you boys done jerkin on dem candles a yours yet? " Delta's voice was growing hoarse and cracked. "Or maybe it's just you can't fine em. Dat it?"

"Come on." The gunslinger got slowly to his feet. He swayed for a moment, saw Eddie looking at him, and smiled. "I'll be all right."

"For how long?"

"As long as I have to be," the gunslinger answered, and the serenity in his voice chilled Eddie's heart.

12

That night the gunslinger used his last sure live cartridge to make their kill. He would start systematically testing the ones he believed to be duds tomorrow night, but he believed it was pretty much as Eddie had said: They were down to beating the damned things to death.

It was like the other nights: the fire, the cooking, the shelling, the eating—eating which was now slow and unenthusiastic. We're just gassing up, Eddie thought. They offered food to Detta, who screamed and laughed and cursed and asked how long they was goan take her for a fool, and then she began throwing her body wildly from one side to the other, never minding how her bonds grew steadily tighter, only trying to upset the chair to one side or the other so they would have to pick her up again before they could eat.

Just before she could manage the trick, Eddie grabbed her and Roland braced the wheels on either sides with rocks.

"I'll loosen the ropes a bit if you'll be still," Roland told her.

"Suck shit out my ass, mahfah!"

"I don't understand if that means yes or no."

She looked at him, eyes narrowed, suspecting some bur-ied barb of satire in that calm voice (Eddie also wondered, but couldn't tell if there was or not), and after a moment she said sulkily, "I be still. Too damn hungry to kick up much dickens. You boys goan give me some real food or you jes goan starve me to death? Dat yo plan? You too chickenshit to choke me and I ain't nev' goan eat no poison, so dat must be you plan. Starve me out. Well, we see, sho. We goan see. Sho we are."

She offered them her bone-chilling sickle of a grin again.

Not long after she fell asleep.

Eddie touched the side of Roland's face. Roland glanced at him but did not pull away from the touch.

"I'm all right."

"Yeah, you're Jim-dandy. Well, I tell you what, Jim, we didn't get along very far today."

"I know." There was also the matter of having used the last live shell, but that was knowledge Eddie could do without, at least tonight. Eddie wasn't sick, but he was exhausted. Too exhausted for more bad news.

No, he's not sick, not yet, but if he goes too long without rest, gets tired enough, he'll get sick.

In a way, Eddie already was; both of them were. Cold-sores had developed at the corners of Eddie's mouth, and there was scaly patches on his skin. The gunslinger could feel his teeth loosening up in their sockets, and the flesh between his toes had begun to crack open and bleed, as had that between his remaining fingers. They were eating, but they were eating the same thing, day in and day out. They could go on that way for a time, but in the end they would die as surely as if they had starved.

What we have is Shipmate's Disease on dry land, Roland thought. Simple as that. How funny. We need fruit. We need greens.

Eddie nodded toward the Lady. "She's going to go right on making it tough."

"Unless the other one inside her comes back."

"That would be nice, but we can't count on it," Eddie said. He took a piece of blackened claw and began to scrawl aimless patterns in the dirt. "Any idea how far the next door might be?"

Roland shook his head.

"I only ask because if the distance between Number Two and Number Three is the same as the distance between Number One and Number Two, we could be in deep shit."

"We're in deep shit right now."

"Neck deep," Eddie agreed moodily. "I just keep wonder-ing how long I can tread water."

Roland clapped him on the shoulder, a gesture of affection so rare it made Eddie blink.

"There's one thing that Lady doesn't know," he said.

"Oh? What's that?"

"We Honk Mahfahs can tread water a long time."

Eddie laughed at that, laughed hard, smothering his laughter against his arm so he wouldn't wake Delta up. He'd had enough of her for one day, please and thank you.

The gunslinger looked at him, smiling. "I'm going to turn in," he said. "Be—" "—on my guard. Yeah. I will."

13

Screaming was next.

Eddie fell asleep the moment his head touched the bunched bundle of his shirt, and it seemed only five minutes later when Delta began screaming.

He was awake at once, ready for anything, some King Lobster arisen from the deep to take revenge for its slain children or a horror down from the hills. It seemed he was awake at once, anyway, but the gunslinger was already on his feet,

a gun in his left hand.

When she saw they were both awake, Delta promptly quit screaming.

"Jes thought I'd see if you boys on yo toes," she said. "Might be woofs. Looks likely enough country for 'em. Wanted to make sho if I saw me a woof creepin up, I could get you on yo feet in time." But there was no fear in her eyes; they glinted with mean amusement.

"Christ," Eddie said groggily. The moon was up but barely risen; they had been asleep less than two hours.

The gunslinger bolstered his gun.

"Don't do it again," he said to the Lady in the wheelchair.

"What you goan do if I do? Rape me?"

"If we were going to rape you, you would be one well-raped woman by now," the gunslinger said evenly. "Don't do it again."

He lay down again, pulling his blanket over him.

Christ, dear Christ, Eddie thought, what a mess this is, what a fucking . . .

and that was as far as the thought went before trailing off into exhausted sleep again and then she was splintering the air with fresh shrieks, shrieking like a firebell, and Eddie was up again, his body flaming with adrenaline, hands clenched, and then she was laughing, her voice hoarse and raspy.

Eddie glanced up and saw the moon had advanced less than ten degrees since she had awakened them the first time.

She means to keep on doing it, he thought wearily. She means to stay awake and watch us, and when she's sure we're getting down into deep sleep, that place where you recharge, she's going to open her mouth and start bellowing again. She'll do it and do it and do it until she doesn't have any voice left to bellow with.

Her laughter stopped abruptly. Roland was advancing on her, a dark shape in the moonlight.

"You jes stay away from me, graymeat," Delta said, but there was a quiver of nerves in her voice. "You ain't goan do nothing to me."

Roland stood before her and for a moment Eddie was sure, completely sure, that the gunslinger had reached the end of his patience and would simply swat her like a fly. Instead, astoundingly, he dropped to one knee before her like a suitor about to propose marriage.

"Listen," he said, and Eddie could scarcely credit the silky quality of Roland's voice. He could see much the same deep surprise on Delta's face, only there fear was joined to it. "Listen to me, Odetta."

"Who you callin O-De-tta? Dat ain my name."

"Shut up, bitch," the gunslinger said in a growl, and then, reverting to that same silken voice: "If you hear me, and if you can control her at all—"

"Why you talkin at me dat way? Why you talkin like you was talkin to somebody else? You quit dat honky jive! You jes quit it now, you hear me?"

"—keep her shut up. I can gag her, but I don't want to do that. A hard gag is a dangerous business. People choke."

"YOU QUIT IT YOU HONKY BULLSHIT VOO-DOO MAHFAH!"

"Odetta." His voice was a whisper, like the onset of rain.

She fell silent, staring at him with huge eyes. Eddie had never in his life seen such hate and fear combined in human eyes.

"I don't think this bitch would care if she did die on a hard gag. She wants to die, but maybe even more, she wants you to die. But you haven't died, not so

far, and I don't think Delta is brand-new in your life. She feels too at home in you, so maybe you can hear what I'm saying, and maybe you can keep some control over her even if you can't come out yet.

"Don't let her wake us up a third time, Odetta.

"I don't want to gag her.

"But if I have to, I will."

He got up, left without looking back, rolled himself into his blanket again, and promptly fell asleep.

She was still staring at him, eyes wide, nostrils flaring.

"Honky voodoo bullshit," she whispered.

Eddie lay down, but this time it was a long time before sleep came to claim him, in spite of his deep tiredness. He would come to the brink, anticipate her screams, and snap back.

Three hours or so later, with the moon now going the other way, he finally dropped off.

Delta did no more screaming that night, either because Roland had frightened her, or because she wanted to conserve her voice for future alarums and excursions, or—possibly, just possibly—because Odetta had heard and had exercised the control the gunslinger had asked of her.

Eddie slept at last but awoke sodden and unrefreshed. He looked toward the chair, hoping against hope that it would be Odetta, please God let it be Odetta this morning—

"Mawnin, whitebread," Delta said, and grinned her sharklike grin at him.

"Thought you was goan sleep till noon.

You cain't be doin nuthin like dat, kin you? We got to bus us some miles here, ain't dat d'fac of d'matter? Sho! An I think you the one goan have to do most of de bustin, cause dat other fella, one with de voodoo eyes, he lookin mo peaky all de time, I declare he do! Yes! I doan think he goan be eatin anythin much longer, not even dat fancy smoked meat you whitebread boys keep fo when you done joikin on each other one's little bitty white candles. So let's go, whitebread!

Delta doan want to be d'one keepin you."

Her lids and her voice both dropped a little; her eyes peeked at him slyly from their corners.

"Not fum startin out, leastways."

Dis goan be a day you 'member, whitebread, those sly eyes promised. Dis goan be a day you 'member for a long, long time.

Sho.

14

They made three miles that day, maybe a shade under. Delta's chair upset twice. Once she did it herself, working her fingers slowly and unobtrusively over to that handbrake again and yanking it. The second time Eddie did with no help at all, shoving too hard in one of those goddamned sandtraps. Thai was near the end of the day, and he simply panicked, thinking he just wasn't going to be able to get her out this time, just wasn't. So he gave that one last titanic heave with his quiver-ing arms, and of course it had been much too hard, and over she had gone, like Humpty Dumpty falling off his wall, and he and Roland had to labor to get her upright again. They finished the job just in time. The rope under her breasts was now pulled taut across her windpipe. The gunslinger's efficient

running slipknot was choking her to death. Her face had gone a funny blue color, she was on the verge of losing consciousness, but still she went on wheezing her nasty laughter.

Let her be, why don't you? Eddie nearly said as Roland bent quickly forward to loosen the knot. Let her choke! I don't know if she wants to do herself like you said, but I know she wants to do US . . . so let her go!

Then he remembered Odetta (although their encounter had been so brief and seemed so long ago that memory was growing dim) and moved forward to help.

The gunslinger pushed him impatiently away with one hand. "Only room for one." When the rope was loosened and the Lady gasping harshly for breath (which she expelled in gusts of her angry laughter), he turned and looked at Eddie critically. "I think we ought to stop for the night."

"A little further." He was almost pleading. "I can go a little further."

"Sho! He be one strong buck He be good fo choppin one mo row cotton and he still have enough lef<sup>r</sup> to give yo little bitty white candle one fine suckin-on t'night."

She still wouldn't eat, and her face was becoming all stark lines and angles.

Her eyes glittered in deepening sockets.

Roland gave her no notice at all, only studied Eddie closely. At last he nodded.

"A little way. Not far, but a little way."

Twenty minutes later Eddie called it quits himself. His arms felt like Jell-O.

They sat in the shadows of the rocks, listening to the gulls, watching the tide come in, waiting for the sun to go down and the lobstrosities to come out and begin their cum-bersome cross-examinations.

Roland told Eddie in a voice too low for Delta to hear that he thought they were out of live shells. Eddie's mouth tight-ened down a little but that was all.

Roland was pleased.

"So you'll have to brain one of them yourself," Roland said. "I'm too weak to handle a rock big enough to do the job . . . and still be sure."

Eddie was now the one to do the studying.

He had no liking for what he saw.

The gunslinger waved his scrutiny away.

"Never mind," he said. "Never mind, Eddie. What is, is."

"Ka," Eddie said.

The gunslinger nodded and smiled faintly. "Ka."

"Kaka," Eddie said, and they looked at each other, and both laughed. Roland looked startled and perhaps even a little afraid of the rusty sound emerging from his mouth. His laugh-ter did not last long. When it had stopped he looked distant and melancholy.

"Dat laffin mean you fine'ly managed to joik each other off?" Delta cried over at them in her hoarse, failing voice. "When you goan get down to de pokin? Dat's what I want to see! Dat pokin!"

Delta refused to eat, as before. Eddie ate half a piece so she could see, then offered her the other half.

"Nossuh!" she said, eyes sparking at him. "No SUH! You done put de poison in t'other end. One you trine to give me."

Without saying anything, Eddie look the rest of the piece, put it in his mouth, chewed, swallowed.

"Doan mean a thing," Delia said sulkily. "Leave me alone, graymeat."

Eddie wouldn't

He brought her another piece.

"You tear it in half. Give me whichever you want I'll eat it, then you eat the rest."

"Ain't fallin fo none o yo honky tricks, Mist' Chahlie. Git away f'um me is what I said, and git away f'um me is what I meant"

16

She did not scream in the night. . . but she was still there the next morning.

17

That day they made only two miles, although Delia made no effort to upset her chair; Eddie thought she might be growing too weak for acts of attempted sabotage. Or perhaps she had seen there was really no need for them. Three fatal factors were drawing inexorably together: Eddie's weariness, the terrain, which after endless days of endless days of same-ness, was finally beginning to change, and Roland's deteriorating condition.

There were less sandtraps, but that was cold comfort. The ground was becoming grainier, more and more like cheap and unprofitable soil and less and less like sand (in places bunches of weeds grew, looking almost ashamed to be there), and there were so many large rocks now jutting from this odd combination of sand and soil that Eddie found himself detouring around them as he had previously tried to detour the Lady's chair around the sandtraps. And soon enough, he saw, there would be no beach left at all. The hills, brown and cheerless things, were drawing steadily closer. Eddie could see the ravines which curled between them, looking like chops made by an awkward giant wielding a blunt cleaver. That night, before falling asleep, he heard what sounded like a very large cat squalling far up in one of them.

The beach had seemed endless, but he was coming to realize it had an end after all. Somewhere up ahead, those hills were simply going to squeeze it out of existence. The eroded hills would march down to the sea and then into it, where they might become first a cape or peninsula of sorts, and then a series of archipelagoes.

That worried him, but Roland's condition worried him more.

This time the gunslinger seemed not so much to be burning as fading, losing himself, becoming transparent.

The red lines had appeared again, marching relentlessly up the underside of his right arm toward the elbow.

For the last two days Eddie had looked constantly ahead, squinting into the distance, hoping to see the door, the door, the magic door. For the last two days he had waited for Odetta to reappear.

Neither had appeared.

Before falling asleep that night two terrible thoughts came to him, like some joke with a double punchline:

What if there was no door?

What if Odetta Holmes was dead?

18

"Rise and shine, mahfah!" Detta screeched him out of unconsciousness. "I think it jes be you and me now, honey-chile. Think yo frien done finally passed on. I think yo frien be pokin the devil down in hell."

Eddie looked at the rolled huddled shape of Roland and for one terrible moment he thought the bitch was right. Then the gunslinger stirred, moaned furrily, and pawed himself into a sitting position.

"Well looky yere!" Detta had screamed so much that now there were moments when her voice disappeared almost entirely, becoming no more than a weird whisper, like winter wind under a door. "I thought you was dead, Mister Man!"

Roland was getting slowly to his feet. He still looked to Eddie like a man using the rungs of an invisible ladder to make it. Eddie felt an angry sort of pity, and this was a familiar emotion, oddly nostalgic. After a moment he understood. It was like when he and Henry used to watch the fights on TV, and one fighter would hurt the other, hurt him terribly, again and again, and the crowd would be screaming for blood, and Henry would be screaming for blood, but Eddie only sat there, feeling that angry pity, that dumb disgust; he'd sat there sending thought-waves at the referee: Stop it, man, are you fucking blind? He's dying out there! DYING! Stop the fucking fight!

There was no way to stop this one.

Roland looked at her from his haunted feverish eyes. "A lot of people have thought that, Detta." He looked at Eddie. "You ready?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Are you?"

"Yes."

"Can you?"

"Yes."

They went on.

Around ten o'clock Delta began rubbing her temples with her fingers.

"Stop," she said. "I feel sick. Feel like I goan throw up."

"Probably that big meal you ate last night," Eddie said, and went on pushing.

"You should have skipped dessert. I told you that chocolate layer cake was heavy."

"I goan throw up! I—"

"Stop, Eddie!" the gunslinger said.

Eddie stopped.

The woman in the chair suddenly twisted galvanically, as if an electric shock had run through her. Her eyes popped wide open, glaring at nothing.

"I BROKE YO PLATE YOU STINKIN OLE BLUE LADY!" she screamed. "I BROKE IT AND I'M

FUCKIN GLAD ID—"

She suddenly slumped forward in her chair. If not for the ropes, she would have fallen out of it.

Christ, she's dead, she's had a stroke and she's dead, Eddie thought. He started around the chair, remembered how sly and tricky she could be, and stopped as suddenly as he had started. He looked at Roland. Roland looked back at him evenly, his eyes giving away not a thing.

Then she moaned. Her eyes opened.

Her eyes.

Odetta's eyes.

"Dear God, I've fainted again, haven't I?" she said. "I'm sorry you had to tie me in. My stupid legs! I think I could sit up a little if you—"

That was when Roland's own legs slowly came unhinged and he swooned some thirty miles south of the place where the Western Sea's beach came to an end.

re-shuffle

1

To Eddie Dean, he and the Lady no longer seemed to be trudging or even walking up what remained of the beach. They seemed to be flying.

Odetta Holmes still neither liked nor trusted Roland; that was clear. But she recognized how desperate his condition had become, and responded to that. Now, instead of pushing a dead clump of steel and rubber to which a human body just happened to be attached, Eddie felt almost as if he were push-ing a glider.

Go with her. Before, I was watching out for you and that was important. Now I'll only slow you down.

He came to realize how right the gunslinger was almost at once. Eddie pushed the chair; Odetta pumped it.

One of the gunslinger's revolvers was stuck in the waist-band of Eddie's pants.

Do you remember when I told you to be on your guard and you weren't?

Yes.

I'm telling you again: Be on your guard. Every moment. If her other comes back, don't wait even a second. Brain her.

What if I kill her?

Then it's the end. But if she kills you, that's the end, too. And if she comes back she'll try. She'll try.

Eddie hadn't wanted to leave him. It wasn't just that cat-scream in the night (although he kept thinking about it); it was simply that Roland had become his only touchstone in this world. He and Odetta didn't belong here.

Still, he realized that the gunslinger had been right.

"Do you want to rest?" he asked Odetta. "There's more food. A little."

"Not yet," she answered, although her voice sounded tired. "Soon."

"All right, but at least stop pumping. You're weak. Your . . . your stomach, you know."

"All right." She turned, her face gleaming with sweat, and favored him with a



smile that both weakened and strength-ened him. He could have died for such a smile. . . and thought he would, if circumstances demanded.

He hoped to Christ circumstances wouldn't, but it surely wasn't out of the question. Time had become something so crucial it screamed.

She put her hands in her lap and he went on pushing. The tracks the chair left behind were now dimmer; the beach had become steadily firmer, but it was also littered with rubble that could cause an accident. You wouldn't have to help one happen at the speed they were going. A really bad accident might hurt Odetta and that would be bad; such an accident could also wreck the chair, and that would be bad for them and probably worse for the gunslinger, who would almost surely die alone. And if Roland died, they would be trapped in this world forever.

With Roland too sick and weak to walk, Eddie had been forced to face one simple fact: there were three people here, and two of them were cripples.

So what hope, what chance was there?

The chair.

The chair was the hope, the whole hope, and nothing but the hope.

So help them God.

2

The gunslinger had regained consciousness shortly after Eddie dragged him into the shade of a rock outcropping. His face, where it was not ashy, was a hectic red. His chest rose and fell rapidly. His right arm was a network of twisting red lines.

"Feed her," he croaked at Eddie.

"You—"

"Never mind me. I'll be all right. Feed her. She'll eat now, I think. And you'll need her strength."

"Roland, what if she's just pretending to be—"

The gunslinger gestured impatiently.

"She's not pretending to be anything, except alone in her body. I know it and you do, too. It's in her face. Feed her, for the sake of your father, and while she eats, come back to me. Every minute counts now. Every second."

Eddie got up, and the gunslinger pulled him back with his left hand. Sick or not, his strength was still there.

"And say nothing about the other. Whatever she tells you, however she explains, don't contradict her."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just know it's wrong. Now do as I say and don't waste any more time!"

Odetta had been sitting in her chair, looking out at the sea with an expression of mild and bemused amazement. When Eddie offered her the chunks of lobster left over from the previous night, she smiled ruefully. "I would if I could," she said, "but you know what happens."

Eddie, who had no idea what she was talking about, could only shrug and say, "It wouldn't hurt to try again, Odetta. You need to eat, you know. We've got to go as fast as we can."

She laughed a little and touched his hand. He felt some-thing like an electric charge jump from her to him. And it was her; Odetta. He knew it as well as Roland did.

"I love you, Eddie. You have tried so hard. Been so patient. So has he—" She nodded toward the place where the gunslinger lay propped against the rocks, watching. "—but he is a hard man to love."

"Yeah. Don't I know it."

"I'll try one more time."

"For you."

She smiled and he felt all the world move for her, because of her, and he thought Please God, I have never had much, so please don't take her away from me again. Please.

She took the chunks of lobster-meat, wrinkled her nose in a rueful comic expression, and looked up at him.

"Must I?"

"Just give it a shot," he said.

"I never ate scallops again," she said.

"Pardon?"

"I thought I told you."

"You might have," he said, and gave a little nervous laugh. What the gunslinger had said about not letting her know about the other loomed very large inside his mind just then.

"We had them for dinner one night when I was ten or eleven. I hated the way they tasted, like little rubber balls, and later I vomited them up. I never ate them again. But..." She sighed. "As you say, I'll 'give it a shot.' "

She put a piece in her mouth like a child taking a spoon-ful of medicine she knows will taste nasty. She chewed slowly at first, then more rapidly. She swallowed. Took another piece. Chewed, swallowed. Another. Now she was nearly wolfing it.

"Whoa, slow down!" Eddie said.

"It must be another kind! That's it, of course it is!" She looked at Eddie shiningly. "We've moved further up the beach and the species has changed! I'm no longer allergic, it seems! It doesn't taste nasty, like it did before. . . and I did try to keep it down, didn't I?" She looked at him nakedly. "I tried very hard."

"Yeah." To himself he sounded like a radio broadcasting a very distant signal.

She thinks she's been eating every day and then upchucking everything. She thinks that's why she's so weak. Christ Almighty. "Yeah, you tried like hell."

"It tastes—" These words were hard to pick up because her mouth was full. "It tastes so good!" She laughed. The sound was delicate and lovely. "It's going to stay down! I'm going to take nourishment! I know it! I feel it!"

"Just don't overdo it," he cautioned, and gave her one of the water-skins.

"You're not used to it. All that—" He swallowed and there was an audible (audible to him, at least) click in his throat. "All that throwing up."

"Yes. Yes."

"I need to talk to Roland for a few minutes."

"All right."

But before he could go she grasped his hand again.

"Thank you, Eddie. Thank you for being so patient. And thank him." She paused gravely. "Thank him, and don't tell him that he scares me."

"I won't," Eddie had said, and went back to the gunslinger.

Even when she wasn't pushing, Odetta was a help. She navigated with the prescience of a woman who has spent a long time weaving a wheelchair through a world that would not acknowledge handicapped people such as she for years to come.

"Left," she'd call, and Eddie would gee to the left, gliding past a rock snarling out of the pasty grit like a decayed fang. On his own, he might have seen it... or maybe not.

"Right," she called, and Eddie hawed right, barely missing one of the increasingly rare sandtraps.

They finally stopped and Eddie lay down, breathing hard.

"Sleep," Odetta said. "An hour. I'll wake you."

Eddie looked at her.

"I'm not lying. I observed your friend's condition, Eddie—"

"He's not exactly my friend, you kn—"

"—and I know how important time is. I won't let you sleep longer than an hour out of a misguided sense of mercy. I can tell the sun quite well. You won't do that man any good by wearing yourself out, will you?"

"No," he said, thinking: But you don't understand. If I sleep and Delta Walker comes back—

"Sleep, Eddie," she said, and since Eddie was too weary (and too much in love) to do other than trust her, he did. He slept and she woke him when she said she would and she was still Odetta, and they went on, and now she was pumping again, helping. They raced up the diminishing beach toward the door Eddie kept frantically looking for and kept not seeing.

4

When he left Odetta eating her first meal in days and went back to the gunslinger, Roland seemed a little better.

"Hunker down," he said to Eddie.

Eddie hunkered.

"Leave me the skin that's half full. All I need. Take her to the door."

"What if I don't—"

"Find it? You'll find it. The first two were there; this one will be, too. If you get there before sundown tonight, wait for dark and then kill double. You'll need to leave her food and make sure she's sheltered as well as she can be. If you don't reach it tonight, kill triple. Here."

He handed over one of his guns.

Eddie took it with respect, surprised as before by how heavy it was.

"I thought the shells were all losers."

"Probably are. But I've loaded with the ones I believe were wetted least—three from the buckle side of the left belt, three from the buckle side of the right.

One may fire. Two, if you're lucky. Don't try them on the crawlies." His eyes considered Eddie briefly. "There may be other things out there."

"You heard it too, didn't you?"

"If you mean something yowling in the hills, yes. If you mean the Bugger-Man, as your eyes say, no. I heard a wildcat in the brakes, that's all, maybe with a voice four times the size of its body. It may be nothing you can't drive off with a stick. But there's her to think about. If her other comes back, you may

have to—"

"I won't kill her, if that's what you're thinking!"

"You may have to wing her. You understand?"

Eddie gave a reluctant nod. Goddam shells probably wouldn't fire anyway, so there was no sense getting his panties in a bunch about it.

"When you get to the door, leave her. Shelter her as well as you can, and come back to me with the chair."

"And the gun?"

The gunslinger's eyes blazed so brightly that Eddie snapped his head back, as if Roland had thrust a flaming torch in his face. "Gods, yes! Leave her with a loaded gun, when her other might come back at any time? Are you insane?"

"The shells—"

"Fuck the shells!" the gunslinger cried, and a freak drop in the wind allowed the words to carry. Odetta turned her head, looked at them for a long moment, then looked back toward the sea. "Leave it with her not!"

Eddie kept his voice low in case the wind should drop again. "What if something comes down from the brakes while I'm on my way back here? Some kind of cat four times bigger than its voice, instead of the other way around? Something you can't drive off with a stick?"

"Give her a pile of stones," the gunslinger said.

"Stones! Jesus wept! Man, you are such a fucking shit!"

"I am thinking," the gunslinger said. "Something you seem unable to do. I gave you the gun so you could protect her from the sort of danger you're talking about for half of the trip you must make. Would it please you if I took the gun back? Then perhaps you could die for her. Would that please you? Very romantic. . . except then, instead of just her, all three of us would go down."

"Very logical. You're still a fucking shit, however."

"Go or stay. Stop calling me names."

"You forgot something," Eddie said furiously.

"What was that?"

"You forgot to tell me to grow up. That's what Henry always used to say. 'Oh grow up, kid.'"

The gunslinger had smiled, a weary, oddly beautiful smile. "I think you have grown up. Will you go or stay?"

"I'll go," Eddie said. "What are you going to eat? She scarfed the left-overs."

"The fucking shit will find a way. The fucking shit has been finding one for years."

Eddie looked away. "I... I guess I'm sorry I called you that, Roland. It's been—" He laughed suddenly, shrilly. "It's been a very trying day."

Roland smiled again. "Yes," he said. "It has."

5

They made the best time of the entire trek that day, but there was still no door in sight when the sun began to spill its gold track across the ocean. Although she told him she was perfectly capable of going on for another half an hour, he called a halt and helped her out of the chair. He carried her to an even patch of ground that looked fairly smooth, got the cushions from the back of the chair and the seat, and eased them under her.

"Lord, it feels so good to stretch out," she sighed. "But ..." Her brow clouded.

"I keep thinking of that man back there, Roland, all by himself, and I can't really enjoy it. Eddie, who is he? What is he?" And, almost as an afterthought: "And why does he shout so much?"

"Just his nature, I guess," Eddie said, and abruptly went off to gather rocks. Roland hardly ever shouted. He guessed some of it was this morning—FUCK the shells!—but that the rest of it was false memory: the time she thought she had been Odetta.

He killed triple, as the gunslinger had instructed, and was so intent on the last that he skipped back from a fourth which had been closing in on his right with only an instant to spare. He saw the way its claws clicked on the empty place which had been occupied by his foot and leg a moment before, and thought of the gunslinger's missing fingers.

He cooked over a dry wood fire—the encroaching hills and increasing vegetation made the search for good fuel quicker and easier, that was one thing—while the last of the daylight faded from the western sky.

"Look, Eddie!" she cried, pointing up.

He looked, and saw a single star gleaming on the breast of the night.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes," he said, and suddenly, for no reason, his eyes filled with tears. Just where had he been all of his goddamned life? Where had he been, what had he been doing, who had been with him while he did it, and why did he suddenly feel so grimy and abysmally beshitted?

Her lifted face was terrible in its beauty, irrefutable in this light, but the beauty was unknown to its possessor, who only looked at the star with wide wondering eyes, and laughed softly.

"Star light, star bright," she said, and stopped. She looked at him. "Do you know it, Eddie?"

"Yeah." Eddie kept his head down. His voice sounded clear enough, but if he looked up she would see he was weeping.

"Then help me. But you have to look."

"Okay."

He wiped the tears into the palm of one hand and looked up at the star with her.

"Star light—" she looked at him and he joined her. "Star bright—"

Her hand reached out, groping, and he clasped it, one the delicious brown of light chocolate, the other the delicious white of a dove's breast.

"First star I see tonight," they spoke solemnly in unison, boy and girl for this now, not man and woman as they would be later, when the dark was full and she called to ask him if he was asleep and he said no and she asked if he would hold her because she was cold; "Wish I may, wish I might—"

They looked at each other, and he saw that tears were streaming down her cheeks. His own came again, and he let them fall in her sight. This was not a shame but an inexpressible relief.

They smiled at each other.

"Have the wish I wish tonight," Eddie said, and thought: Please, always you.

"Have the wish I wish tonight," she echoed, and thought If I must die in this odd place, please let it not be too hard and let this good young man be with me.

"I'm sorry I cried," she said, wiping her eyes. "I don't usually, but it's been—"

"A very trying day," he finished for her.

"Yes. And you need to eat, Eddie."

"You do, too."

"I just hope it doesn't make me sick again."

He smiled at her.

"I don't think it will."

6

Later, with strange galaxies turning in slow gavotte over-head, neither thought the act of love had ever been so sweet, so full.

7

They were off with the dawn, racing, and by nine Eddie was wishing he had asked Roland what he should do if they came to the place where the hills cut off the beach and there was still no door in sight. It seemed a question of some importance, because the end of the beach was coming, no doubt about that. The hills marched ever closer, running in a diagonal line toward the water. The beach itself was no longer a beach at all, not really; the soil was now firm and quite smooth. Something—run-off, he supposed, or flooding at some rainy season (there had been none since he had been in this world, not a drop; the sky had clouded over a few times, but then the clouds had blown away again)—had worn most of the jutting rocks away.

At nine-thirty, Odetta cried: "Stop, Eddie! Stop!"

He stopped so abruptly that she had to grab the arms of the chair to keep from tumbling out. He was around to her in a flash.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Fine." He saw he had mistaken excitement for distress. She pointed. "Up there! Do you see something?"

He shaded his eyes and saw nothing. He squinted. For just a moment he thought . . . no, it was surely just heat-shimmer rising from the packed ground.

"I don't think so," he said, and smiled. "Except maybe your wish."

"I think I do!" She turned her excited, smiling face to him. "Standing all by itself! Near where the beach ends."

He looked again, squinting so hard this time that his eyes watered. He thought again for just a moment that he saw something. You did, he thought, and smiled. You saw her wish.

"Maybe," he said, not because he believed it but because she did.

"Let's go!"

Eddie went behind the chair again, taking a moment to massage his lower back where a steady ache had settled. She looked around.

"What are you waiting for?"

"You really think you've got it spotted, don't you?"

"Yes!"

"Well then, let's go!"

Eddie started pushing again.

8

Half an hour later he saw it, too. Jesus, he thought, her eyes are as good as Roland's. Maybe better.

Neither wanted to stop for lunch, but they needed to eat. They made a quick meal and then pushed on again. The tide was coming in and Eddie looked to the right—west—with rising unease. They were still well above the tangled line of kelp and seaweed that marked high water, but he thought that by the time they reached the door they would be in an uncomfortably tight angle bounded by the sea on one side and the slanting hills on the other. He could see those hills very clearly now. There was nothing pleasant about the view. They were rocky, studded with low trees that curled their roots into the ground like arthritic knuckles, keeping a grim grip, and thorny-looking bushes. They weren't really steep, but too steep for the wheelchair. He might be able to carry her up a way, might, in fact, be forced to, but he didn't fancy leaving her there.

For the first time he was hearing insects. The sound was a little like crickets, but higher pitched than that, and with no swing of rhythm—just a steady monotonous riiiiiii sound like power-lines. For the first time he was seeing birds other than gulls. Some were biggies that circled inland on stiff wings. Hawks, he thought. He saw them fold their wings from time to time and plummet like stones. Hunting. Hunting what? Well, small animals. That was all right. Yet he kept thinking of that yowl he'd heard in the night.

By mid-afternoon they could see the third door clearly. Like the other two, it was an impossibility which nonetheless stood as stark as a post.

"Amazing," he heard her say softly. "How utterly amaz-ing."

It was exactly where he had begun to surmise it would be, in the angle that marked the end of any easy northward progress. It stood just above the high tide line and less than nine yards from the place where the hills suddenly leaped out of the ground like a giant hand coated with gray-green brush instead of hair.

The tide came full as the sun swooned toward the water; and at what might have been four o'clock—Odetta said so, and since she had said she was good at telling the sun (and because she was his beloved), Eddie believed her—they reached the door.

9

They simply looked at it, Odetta in her chair with her hands in her lap, Eddie on the sea-side. In one way they looked at it as they had looked at the evening star the previous night—which is to say, as children look at things—but in another they looked differently. When they wished on the star they had been children of joy. Now they were solemn, wondering, like children looking at the stark embodiment of a thing which only belonged in a fairy tale.

Two words were written on this door.

"What does it mean?" Odetta asked finally.

"I don't know," Eddie said, but those words had brought a hopeless chill; he felt an eclipse stealing across his heart.

"Don't you?" she asked, looking at him more closely.

"No. I..." He swallowed. "No."

She looked at him a moment longer. "Push me behind it, please. I'd like to see that. I know you want to get back to him, but would you do that for me?"

He would.

They started around, on the high side of the door.

"Wait!" she cried. "Did you see it?"

"What?"

"Go back! Look! Watch!"

This time he watched the door instead of what might be ahead to trip them up. As they went above it he saw it narrow in perspective, saw its hinges, hinges which seemed to be buried in nothing at all, saw its thickness . . .

Then it was gone.

The thickness of the door was gone.

His view of the water should have been interrupted by three, perhaps even four inches of solid wood (the door looked extraordinarily stout), but there was no such interruption.

The door was gone.

Its shadow was there, but the door was gone.

He rolled the chair back two feet, so he was just south of the place where the door stood, and the thickness was there.

"You see it?" he asked in a ragged voice.

"Yes! It's there again!"

He rolled the chair forward a foot. The door was still there. Another six inches. Still there. Another two inches. Still there. Another inch . . . and it was gone. Solid gone.

"Jesus," he whispered. "Jesus Christ."

"Would it open for you?" she asked. "Or me?"

He stepped forward slowly and grasped the knob of the door with those two words upon it.

He tried clockwise; he tried anti-clockwise.

The knob moved not an iota.

"All right." Her voice was calm, resigned. "It's for him, then. I think we both knew it. Go for him, Eddie. Now."

"First I've got to see to you."

"I'll be fine."

"No you won't. You're too close to the high tide line. If I leave you here, the lobsters are going to come out when it gets dark and you're going to be din—" Up in the hills, a cat's coughing growl suddenly cut across what he was saying like a knife cutting thin cord. It was a good distance away, but closer than the other had been.

Her eyes flicked to the gunslinger's revolver shoved into the waistband of his pants for just a moment, then back to his face. He felt a dull heat in his cheeks.

"He told you not to give it to me, didn't he?" she said softly. "He doesn't want me to have it. For some reason he doesn't want me to have it."

"The shells got wet," he said awkwardly. "They probably wouldn't fire, anyway."

"I understand. Take me a little way up the slope, Eddie, can you? I know how tired your back must be, Andrew calls it Wheelchair Crouch, but if you take me up a little way, I'll be safe from the lobsters. I doubt if anything else comes very close to where they are."

Eddie thought, When the tide's in, she's probably right . . . but what about when it starts to go out again?

"Give me something to eat and some stones," she said, and her unknowing echo of the gunslinger made Eddie flush again. His cheeks and forehead felt like the sides of a brick oven.

She looked at him, smiled faintly, and shook her head as if he had spoken out



loud. "We're not going to argue about this. I saw how it is with him. His time is very, very short. There is no time for discussion. Take me up a little way, give me food and some stones, then take the chair and go."

10

He got her fixed as quickly as he could, then pulled the gunslinger's revolver and held it out to her butt-first. But she shook her head.

"He'll be angry with both of us. Angry with you for giving, angrier at me for taking."

"Crap!" Eddie yelled. "What gave you that idea?"

"I know," she said, and her voice was impervious.

"Well, suppose that's true. Just suppose. I'll be angry with you if you don't take it."

"Put it back. I don't like guns. I don't know how to use them. If something came at me in the dark the first thing I'd do is wet my pants. The second thing I'd do is point it the wrong way and shoot myself." She paused, looking at Eddie solemnly. "There's something else, and you might as well know it. I don't want to touch anything that belongs to him. Not anything. For me, I think his things might have what my Ma used to call a hoodoo. I like to think of myself as a modern woman . . . but I don't want any hoodoo on me when you're gone and the dark lands on top of me."

He looked from the gun to Odetta, and his eyes still questioned.

"Put it back," she said, stern as a school teacher. Eddie burst out laughing and obeyed.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Because when you said that you sounded like Miss Hathaway. She was my third-grade teacher."

She smiled a little, her luminous eyes never leaving his. She sang softly, sweetly: "Heavenly shades of night are falling . . . it's twilight time. . ."

She trailed off and they both looked west, but the star they had wished on the previous evening had not yet appeared, although their shadows had drawn long.

"Is there anything else, Odetta?" He felt an urge to delay and delay. He thought it would pass once he was actually headed back, but now the urge to seize any excuse to remain, seemed very strong.

"A kiss. I could do with that, if you don't mind."

He kissed her long and when their lips no longer touched, she caught his wrist and stared at him intently. "I never made love with a white man before last night," she said. "I don't know if that's important to you or not. I don't even know if it's important to me. But I thought you should know."

He considered.

"Not to me," he said. "In the dark, I think we were both gray. I love you, Odetta."

She put a hand over his.

"You're a sweet young man and perhaps I love you, too, although it's too early for either of us—"

At that moment, as if given a cue, a wildcat growled in what the gunslinger had called the brakes. It still sounded four or five miles away, but that was still four or five miles closer than the last time they heard it, and it sounded big.

They turned their heads toward the sound. Eddie felt hackles trying to stand up

on his neck. They couldn't quite make it. Sorry, hackles, he thought stupidly. I guess my hair's just a little too long now.

The growl rose to a tortured scream that sounded like a cry of some being suffering a horrid death (it might actually have signaled no more than a successful mating). It held for a moment, almost unbearable, and then it wound down, sliding through lower and lower registers until it was gone or buried beneath the ceaseless cry of the wind. They waited for it to come again, but the cry was not repeated. As far as Eddie was concerned, that didn't matter. He pulled the revolver out of his waistband again and held it out to her.

"Take it and don't argue. If you should need to use it, it won't do shit—that's how stuff like this always works—but take it anyway."

"Do you want an argument?"

"Oh, you can argue. You can argue all you want."

After a considering look into Eddie's almost-hazel eyes, she smiled a little wearily. "I won't argue, I guess." She took the gun. "Please be as quick as you can."

"I will." He kissed her again, hurriedly this time, and almost told her to be careful . . . but seriously, folks, how careful could she be, with the situation what it was?

He picked his way back down the slope through the deepening shadows (the lobstrosities weren't out yet, but they would be putting in their nightly appearance soon), and looked at the words written upon the door again. The same chill rose in his flesh. They were apt, those words. God, they were so apt. Then he looked back up the slope. For a moment he couldn't see her, and then he saw something move. The lighter brown of one palm. She was waving.

He waved back, then turned the wheelchair and began to run with it tipped up in front of him so the smaller, more delicate front wheels would be off the ground. He ran south, back the way he had come. For the first half-hour or so his shadow ran with him, the improbable shadow of a scrawny giant tacked to the soles of his sneakers and stretching long yards to the east. Then the sun went down, his shadow was gone, and the lobstrosities began to tumble out of the waves.

It was ten minutes or so after he heard the first of their buzzing cries when he looked up and saw the evening star glowing calmly against the dark blue velvet of the sky.

Heavenly shades of night are falling . . . it's twilight time ...

Let her be safe. His legs were already aching, his breath too hot and heavy in his lungs, and there was still a third trip to make, this time with the gunslinger as his passenger, and although he guessed Roland must outweigh Odetta by a full hundred pounds and knew he should conserve his strength, Eddie kept running anyway. Let her be safe, that's my wish, let my beloved be safe.

And, like an ill omen, a wildcat screeched somewhere in the tortured ravines that cut through the hills . . . only this wildcat sounded as big as a lion roaring in an African jungle.

Eddie ran faster, pushing the untenanted gantry of the wheelchair before him. Soon the wind began to make a thin, ghastly whine through the freely turning spokes of the raised front wheels.

moment, then heard panting breath and relaxed. It was Eddie. Even without opening his eyes he knew that.

When the wailing sound faded and the running footsteps slowed, Roland opened his eyes. Eddie stood panting before him with sweat running down the sides of his face. His shirt was plastered against his chest in a single dark blotch. Any last vestiges of the college-boy look Jack Andolini had insisted upon were gone. His hair hung over his forehead. He had split his pants at the crotch. The bluish-purple crescents under his eyes completed the picture. Eddie Dean was a mess.

"I made it," he said. "I'm here." He looked around, then back at the gunslinger, as if he could not believe it. "Jesus Christ, I'm really here."

"You gave her the gun."

Eddie thought the gunslinger looked bad—as bad as he'd looked before the first abbreviated round of Keflex, maybe a trifle worse. Fever-heat seemed to be coming off him in waves, and he knew he should have felt sorry for him, but for the moment all he could seem to feel was mad as hell.

"I bust my ass getting back here in record time and all you can say is 'You gave her the gun.' Thanks, man. I mean, I expected some expression of gratitude, but this is just over-fucking-whelming."

"I think I said the only thing that matters."

"Well, now that you mention it, I did," Eddie said, putting his hands on his hips and staring truculently down at the gunslinger. "Now you have your choice. You can get in this chair or I can fold it and try to jam it up your ass. Which do you prefer, mawster?"

"Neither." Roland was smiling a little, the smile of a man who doesn't want to smile but can't help it. "First you're going to take some sleep, Eddie. We'll see what we'll see when the time for seeing comes, but for now you need sleep. You're done in."

"I want to get back to her."

"I do, too. But if you don't rest, you're going to fall down in the traces.

Simple as that. Bad for you, worse for me, and worst of all for her."

Eddie stood for a moment, undecided.

"You made good time," the gunslinger conceded. He squinted at the sun. "It's four, maybe a quarter-past. You sleep five, maybe seven hours, and it'll be full dark—"

"Four. Four hours."

"All right. Until after dark; I think that's the important thing. Then you eat.

Then we move."

"You eat, too."

That faint smile again. "I'll try." He looked at Eddie calmly. "Your life is in my hands now; I suppose you know that."

"Yes."

"I kidnapped you."

"Yes."

"Do you want to kill me? If you do, do it now rather than subject any of us to .

. ." His breath whistled out softly. Eddie heard his chest rattling and cared

very little for the sound. ". . . to any further discomfort," he finished.

"I don't want to kill you."

"Then—" he was interrupted by a sudden harsh burst of coughing "—lie down," he finished.

Eddie did. Sleep did not drift upon him as it sometimes did but seized him with the rough hands of a lover who is awkward in her eagerness. He heard (or perhaps this was only a dream) Roland saying, But you shouldn't have given her the gun, and then he was simply in the dark for an unknown time and then Roland was shaking him awake and when he finally sat up all there seemed to be in his body was pain: pain and weight. His muscles had turned into rusty winches and pullies in a deserted building. His first effort to get to his feet didn't work. He thumped heavily back to the sand. He managed it on the second try, but he felt as if it might take him twenty minutes just to perform such a simple act as turning around. And it would hurt to do it.

Roland's eyes were on him, questioning. "Are you ready?"

Eddie nodded. "Yes. Are you?"

"Yes."

"Can you?"

"Yes."

So they ate . . . and then Eddie began his third and last trip along this cursed stretch of beach.

12

They rolled a good stretch that night, but Eddie was still dully disappointed when the gunslinger called a halt. He offered no disagreement because he was simply too weary to go on without rest, but he had hoped to get further. The weight. That was the big problem. Compared to Odetta, pushing Roland was like pushing a load of iron bars. Eddie slept four more hours before dawn, woke with the sun coming over the eroding hills which were all that remained of the mountains, and listened to the gunslinger coughing. It was a weak cough, full of rales, the cough of an old man who may be coming down with pneumonia.

Their eyes met. Roland's coughing spasm turned into a laugh.

"I'm not done yet, Eddie, no matter how I sound. Are you?"

Eddie thought of Odetta's eyes and shook his head.

"Not done, but I could use a cheeseburger and a Bud."

"Bud?" the gunslinger said doubtfully, thinking of apple trees and the spring flowers in the Royal Court Gardens.

"Never mind. Hop in, my man. No four on the floor, no T-top, but we're going to roll some miles just the same.

And they did, but when sunset came on the second day following his leave-taking of Odetta, they were still only draw-ing near the place of the third door. Eddie lay down, meaning to crash for another four hours, but the screaming cry of one of those cats jerked him out of sleep after only two hours, his heart thumping.

God, the thing sounded fucking huge.

He saw the gunslinger up on one elbow, his eyes gleam-ing in the dark.

"You ready?" Eddie asked. He got slowly to his feet, grinning with pain.

"Are you?" Roland asked again, very softly.

Eddie twisted his back, producing a series of pops like a string of tiny firecrackers. "Yeah. But I could really get behind that cheeseburger."

"I thought chicken was what you wanted."

Eddie groaned. "Cut me a break, man."

The third door was in plain view by the time the sun cleared the hills. Two hours later, they reached it.

All together again, Eddie thought, ready to drop to the sand. But that was apparently not so. There was no sign of Odetta Holmes. No sign at all.

13

"Odetta!" Eddie screamed, and now his voice was broken and hoarse as the voice of Odetta's other had been.

There wasn't even an echo in return, something he might at least have mistaken for Odetta's voice. These low, eroded hills would not bounce sound. There was only the crash of the waves, much louder in this tight arrowhead of land, the rhythmic, hollow boom of surf crashing to the end of some tunnel it had dug in the friable rock, and the steady keening of the wind.

"Odetta!"

This time he screamed so loudly his voice broke and for a moment something sharp, like a jag of fishbone, tore at his vocal cords. His eyes scanned the hills frantically, looking for the lighter patch of brown that would be her palm, looking for movement as she stood up ... looking (God forgive him) for bright splashes of blood on roan-colored rock.

He found himself wondering what he would do if he saw that last, or found the revolver, now with deep toothmarks driven into the smooth sandalwood of the grips. The sight of something like that might drive him into hysteria, might even run him crazy, but he looked for it—or something—just the same.

His eyes saw nothing; his ears brought not the faintest returning cry.

The gunslinger, meanwhile, had been studying the third door. He had expected a single word, the word the man in black had used as he turned the sixth Tarot card at the dusty Golgotha where they had held palaver. Death, Walter had said, but not for you, gunslinger.

There was not one word writ upon this door but two. . . and neither of them was DEATH. He read it again, lips moving soundlessly:

## THE PUSHER

Yet it means death, Roland thought, and knew it was so.

What made him look around was the sound of Eddie's voice, moving away. Eddie had begun to climb the first slope, still calling Odetta's name.

For a moment Roland considered just letting him go.

He might find her, might even find her alive, not too badly hurt, and still herself. He supposed the two of them might even make a life of sorts for themselves here, that Eddie's love for Odetta and hers for him might somehow smother the nightshade who called herself Detta Walker. Yes, between the two of them he supposed it was possible that Detta might simply be squeezed to death.

He was a romantic in his own harsh way . . . yet he was also realist enough to know that sometimes love actually did conquer all. As for himself? Even if he was able to get the drugs from Eddie's world which had almost cured him before, would they be able to cure him this time, or even make a start? He was now very sick, and he found himself wondering if perhaps things hadn't gone too far. His arms and legs ached, his head thudded, his chest was heavy and full of snot.

When he coughed there was a painful grating in his left side, as if ribs were broken there. His left ear flamed. Perhaps, he thought, the time had come to end

it; to just cry off.

At this, everything in him rose up in protest.

"Eddie!" he cried, and there was no cough now. His voice was deep and powerful.

Eddie turned, one foot on raw dirt, the other braced on a jutting spar of rock.

"Go on," he said, and made a curious little sweeping gesture with his hand, a gesture that said he wanted to be rid of the gunslinger so he could be about his real business, the important business, the business of finding Odetta and rescu-ing her if rescue were necessary. "It's all right. Go on through and get the stuff you need. We'll both be here when you get back."

"I doubt that."

"I have to find her." Eddie looked at Roland and his gaze was very young and completely naked. "I mean, I really have to."

"I understand your love and your need," the gunslinger said, "but I want you to come with me this time, Eddie."

Eddie stared at him for a long time, as if trying to credit what he was hearing.

"Come with you," he said at last, bemused. "Come with you! Holy God, now I think I really have heard everything. Deedle-deedle-dumpkin everything. Last time you were so determined I was gonna stay behind you were willing to take a chance on me cutting your throat. This time you want to take a chance on something ripping hers right out."

"That may have already happened," Roland said, al-though he knew it hadn't. The Lady might be hurt, but he knew she wasn't dead.

Unfortunately, Eddie did, too. A week or ten days without his drug had sharpened his mind remarkably. He pointed at the door. "You know she's not. If she was, that goddam thing would be gone. Unless you were lying when you said it wasn't any good without all three of us."

Eddie tried to turn back to the slope, but Roland's eyes held him nailed.

"All right," the gunslinger said. His voice was almost as soft as it had been when he spoke past the hateful face and screaming voice of Detta to the woman trapped somewhere behind it. "She's alive. That being so, why does she not answer your calls?"

"Well. . . one of those cats-things may have carried her away." But Eddie's voice was weak.

"A cat would have killed her, eaten what it wanted, and left the rest. At most, it might have dragged her body into the shade so it could come back tonight and eat meat the sun perhaps hadn't yet spoiled. But if that was the case, the door would be gone. Cats aren't like some insects, who paralyze their prey and carry them off to eat later, and you know it."

"That isn't necessarily true," Eddie said. For a moment he heard Odetta saying You should have been on the debate team, Eddie and pushed the thought aside.

"Could be a cat came for her and she tried to shoot it but the first couple of shells in your gun were misfires. Hell, maybe even the first four or five. The cat gets to her, mauls her, and just before it can kill her . . .

BANG!" Eddie smacked a fist against his palm, seeing all this so vividly that he might have witnessed it. "The bullet kills the cat, or maybe just wounds it, or maybe just scares it off. What about that?"

Mildly, Roland said: "We would have heard a gunshot."

For a moment Eddie could only stand, mute, able to think of no counter-argument.

Of course they would have heard it. The first time they had heard one of the cats yowling, it had to have been fifteen, maybe twenty miles away. A

pistol-shot—

He looked at Roland with sudden cunning. "Maybe you did," he said. "Maybe you heard a gunshot while I was asleep."

"It would have woken you."

"Not as tired as I am, man. I fall asleep, it's like—"

"Like being dead," the gunslinger said in that same mild voice. "I know the feeling."

"Then you understand—"

"But it's not being dead. Last night you were out just like that, but when one of those cats screeched, you were awake and on your feet in seconds. Because of your concern for her. There was no gunshot, Eddie, and you know it. You would have heard it. Because of your concern for her."

"So maybe she brained it with a rock!" Eddie shouted. "How the hell do I know when I'm standing here arguing with you instead of checking out the possibilities? I mean, she could be lying up there someplace hurt, man! Hurt or bleed-ing to death! How'd you like it if I did come through that door with you and she died while we were on the other side? How'd you like to look around once and see that doorway there, then look around twice and see it gone, just like it never was, because she was gone? Then you'd be trapped in my world instead of the other way around!" He stood panting and glaring at the gunslinger, his hands balled into fists.

Roland felt a tired exasperation. Someone—it might have been Cort but he rather thought it had been his father—had had a saying: Might as well try to drink the ocean with a spoon as argue with a lover. If any proof of the saying were needed, there it stood above him, in a posture that was all defiance and defense. Go on, the set of Eddie Dean's body said. Go on, I can answer any question you throw at me.

"Might not have been a cat that found her," he said now. "This may be your world, but I don't think you've ever been to this part of it any more than I've ever been to Borneo. You don't know what might be running around up in those hills, do you? Could be an ape grabbed her, or something like that."

"Something grabbed her, all right," the gunslinger said.

"Well thank God getting sick hasn't driven all the sense out of your m—"

"And we both know what it was. Detta Walker. That's what grabbed her. Detta Walker."

Eddie opened his mouth, but for some little time—only seconds, but enough of them so both acknowledged the truth—the gunslinger's inexorable face bore all his arguments to silence.

14

"It doesn't have to be that way."

"Come a little closer. If we're going to talk, let's talk. Every time I have to shout at you over the waves, it rips another piece of my throat out. That's how it feels, anyway."

"What big eyes you have, grandma," Eddie said, not moving.

"What in hell's name are you talking about?"

"A fairy tale." Eddie did descend a short way back down the slope—four yards, no more. "And fairy tales are what you're thinking about if you believe you can coax me close enough to that wheelchair."

"Close enough for what? I don't understand," Roland said, although he understood perfectly.

Nearly a hundred and fifty yards above them and perhaps a full quarter of a mile to the east, dark eyes—eyes as full of intelligence as they were lacking in human mercy—watched this tableau intently. It was impossible to tell what they were saying; the wind, the waves, and the hollow crash of the surf digging its underground channel saw to that, but Detta didn't need to hear what they were saying to know what they were talking about. She didn't need a telescope to see that the Really Bad Man was now also the Really Sick Man, and maybe the Really Bad Man was willing to spend a few days or even a few weeks torturing a legless Negro woman—way things looked around here, entertainment was mighty hard to come by—but she thought the Really Sick Man only wanted one thing, and that was to get his whitebread ass out of here. Just use that magic doorway to haul the fucker out. But before, he hadn't been hauling no ass. Before, he hadn't been hauling nothing. Before, the Really Bad Man hadn't been nowhere but inside her own head. She still didn't like to think of how that had been, how it had felt, how easily he had overridden all her clawing efforts to push him out, away, to take control of herself again. That had been awful. Terrible. And what made it worse was her lack of understanding. What, exactly, was the real source of her terror? That it wasn't the invasion itself was frightening enough. She knew she might understand if she examined herself more closely, but she didn't want to do that. Such examination might lead her to a place like the one sailors had feared in the ancient days, a place which was no more or less than the edge of the world, a place the cartographers had marked with the legend **HERE THERE BE SARPENTS**. The hideous thing about the Really Bad Man's invasion had been the sense of familiarity that came with it, as if this amazing thing had happened before—not once, but many times. But, frightened or not, she had denied panic. She had observed even as she fought, and she remembered looking into that door when the gunslinger used her hands to pivot the wheelchair toward it. She remembered seeing the body of the Really Bad Man lying on the sand with Eddie crouched above it, a knife in his hand.

Would that Eddie had plunged that knife into the Really Bad Man's throat! Better than a pig-slaughtering! Better by a country mile!

He hadn't, but she had seen the Really Bad Man's body. It had been breathing, but body was the right word just the same; it had only been a worthless thing, like a cast-off towsack which some idiot had stuffed full of weeds or cornshucks.

Delta's mind might have been as ugly as a rat's ass, but it was even quicker and sharper than Eddie's. Really Bad Man there used to be full of piss an vinegar. Not no mo. He know I'm up here and doan want to do nothin but git away befo I come down an kill his ass. His little buddy, though—he still be pretty strong, and he ain't had his fill of hurting on me just yet. Want to come up here and hunt me down no matter how that Really Bad Man be. Sho. He be thinkin, One black bitch widdout laigs no match fo a big ole swingin dick like me. I doan wan t'run. I want to be huntin that black quiff down. I give her a poke or two, den we kin go like you want. That what he be thinkin, and that be all right. That be jes fine, graymeat. You think you can take Delta Walker, you jes come on up here in these Drawers and give her a try. You goan find out when you fuckin with me, you fuckin wit the best, honeybunch! You goan find out—

But she was jerked from the rat-run of her thoughts by a sound that came to her



clearly in spite of the surf and wind: the heavy crack of a pistol-shot.

15

"I think you understand better than you let on," Eddie said. "A whole hell of a lot better. You'd like for me to get in grabbing distance, that's what I think." He jerked his head toward the door without taking his eyes from Roland's face. Unaware that not far away someone was thinking exactly the same thing, he added: "I know you're sick, all right, but it could be you're pretending to be a lot weaker than you really are. Could be you're laying back in the tall grass just a little bit."

"Could be I am," Roland said, unsmiling, and added: "But I'm not."

He was, though ... a little.

"A few more steps wouldn't hurt, though, would it? I'm not going to be able to shout much longer." The last syllable turned into a frog's croak as if to prove his point. "And I need to make you think about what you're doing—planning to do. If I can't persuade you to come with me, maybe I can at least put you on your guard . . . again."

"For your precious Tower," Eddie sneered, but he did come skidding halfway down the slope of ground he had climbed, his tattered tennies kicking up listless clouds of maroon dust.

"For my precious Tower and your precious health," the gunslinger said. "Not to mention your precious life."

He slipped the remaining revolver from the left holster and looked at it with an expression both sad and strange.

"If you think you can scare me with that—"

"I don't. You know I can't shoot you, Eddie. But I think you do need an object lesson in how things have changed. How much things have changed."

Roland lifted the gun, its muzzle pointing not toward Eddie but toward the empty surging ocean, and thumbed the hammer. Eddie steeled himself against the gun's heavy crack.

No such thing. Only a dull click.

Roland thumbed the hammer back again. The cylinder rotated. He squeezed the trigger, and again there was nothing but a dull click.

"Never mind," Eddie said. "Where I come from, the Defense Department would have hired you after the first mis-fire. You might as well qui—"

But the heavy KA-BLAM of the revolver cut off the word's end as neatly as Roland had cut small branches from trees as a target-shooting exercise when he had been a student. Eddie jumped. The gunshot momentarily silenced the constant riiiii of the insects in the hills. They only began to tune up again slowly, cautiously, after Roland had put the gun in his lap.

"What in hell does that prove?"

"I suppose that all depends on what you'll listen to and what you refuse to hear," Roland said a trifle sharply. "It's supposed to prove that not all the shells are duds. Further-more, it suggests—strongly suggests—that some, maybe even all, of the shells in the gun you gave Odetta may be live."

"Bullshit!" Eddie paused. "Why?"

"Because I loaded the gun I just fired with shells from the backs of my gunbelts—with shells that took the worst wetting, in other words. I did it just to pass the time while you were gone. Not that it takes much time to load a gun,

even shy a pair of fingers, you understand!" Roland laughed a little, and the laugh turned into a cough he muzzled with an abridged fist. When the cough had subsided he went on: "But after you've tried to fire wets, you have to break the machine and clean the machine. Break the machine, clean the machine, you mag-gots—it was the first thing Cort, our teacher, drummed into us. I didn't know how long it would take me to break down my gun, clean it, and put it back together with only a hand and a half, but I thought that if I intended to go on living—and I do, Eddie, I do—I'd better find out. Find out and then learn to do it faster, don't you think so? Come a little closer, Eddie! Come a little closer for your father's sake!"

"All the better to see you with, my child," Eddie said, but did take a couple of steps closer to Roland. Only a couple.

"When the first slug I pulled the trigger on fired, I almost filled my pants," the gunslinger said. He laughed again. Shocked, Eddie realized the gunslinger had reached the edge of delirium. "The first slug, but believe me when I say it was the last thing I had expected."

Eddie tried to decide if the gunslinger was lying, lying about the gun, and lying about his condition as well. Cat was sick, yeah. But was he really this sick? Eddie didn't know. If Roland was acting, he was doing a great job; as for guns, Eddie had no way of telling because he had no experience with them. He had shot a pistol maybe three times in his life before suddenly finding himself in a firefight at Balazar's place. Henry might have known, but Henry was dead—a thought which had a way of constantly surprising Eddie into grief.

"None of the others fired," the gunslinger said, "so I cleaned the machine, re-loaded, and fired around the chamber again. This time I used shells a little further toward the belt buckles. Ones which would have taken even less of a wetting. The loads we used to kill our food, the dry loads, were the ones closest to the buckles."

He paused to cough dryly into his hand, then went on.

"Second time around I hit two live rounds. I broke my gun down again, cleaned it again, then loaded a third time. You just watched me drop the trigger on the first three chambers of that third loading." He smiled faintly. "You know, after the first two clicks I thought it would be my damned luck to have filled the cylinder with nothing but wets. That wouldn't have been very convincing, would it? Can you come a little closer, Eddie?"

"Not very convincing at all," Eddie said, "and I think I'm just as close to you as I'm going to come, thanks. What lesson am I supposed to take from all this, Roland?"

Roland looked at him as one might look at an imbecile. "I didn't send you out here to die, you know. I didn't send either of you out here to die. Great gods, Eddie, where are your brains? She's packing live iron!" His eyes regarded Eddie closely. "She's someplace up in those hills. Maybe you think you can track her, but you're not going to have any luck if the ground is as stony as it looks from here. She's lying up there, Eddie, not Odetta but Delta, lying up there with live iron in her hand. If I leave you and you go after her, she'll blow your guts out of your asshole."

Another spasm of coughing set in.

Eddie stared at the coughing man in the wheelchair and the waves pounded and the wind blew its steady idiot's note.

At last he heard his voice say, "You could have held back one shell you knew was

live. I wouldn't put it past you." And with that said he knew it to be true: he wouldn't put that or anything else past Roland.

His Tower.

His goddamned Tower.

And the slyness of putting the saved shell in the third cylinder! It provided just the right touch of reality, didn't it? Made it hard not to believe.

"We've got a saying in my world," Eddie said. "That guy could sell Frigidaires to the Eskimos.' That's the saying."

"What does it mean?"

"It means go pound sand."

The gunslinger looked at him for a long time and then nodded. "You mean to stay. All right. As Delta she's safer from . . . from whatever wildlife there may be around here. . . than she would have been as Odetta, and you'd be safer away from her—at least for the time being—but I can see how it is. I don't like it, but I've no time to argue with a fool."

"Does that mean," Eddie asked politely, "that no one ever tried to argue with you about this Dark Tower you're so set on getting to?"

Roland smiled tiredly. "A great many did, as a matter of fact. I suppose that's why I recognize you'll not be moved. One fool knows another. At any rate, I'm too weak to catch you, you're obviously too wary to let me coax you close enough to grab you, and time's grown too short to argue. All I can do is go and hope for the best. I'm going to tell you one last time before I do go, and hear me, Eddie: Be on your guard."

Then Roland did something that made Eddie ashamed of all his doubts (although no less solidly set in his own deci-sion): he flicked open the cylinder of the revolver with a practiced flick of his wrist, dumped all the loads, and replaced them with fresh loads from the loops closest to the buckles. He snapped the cylinder back into place with another flick of his wrist.

"No time to clean the machine now," he said, "but 'twont matter, I reckon. Now catch, and catch clean—don't dirty the machine any more than it is already.

There aren't many machines left in my world that work anymore."

He threw the gun across the space between them. In his anxiety, Eddie almost did drop it. Then he had it safely tucked into his waistband.

The gunslinger got out of the wheelchair, almost fell when it slid backward under his pushing hands, then tottered to the door. He grasped its knob; in his hand it turned easily. Eddie could not see the scene the door opened upon, but he heard the muffled sound of traffic.

Roland looked back at Eddie, his blue bullshooter's eyes gleaming out of a face which was ghastly pale.

16

Delta watched all of this from her hiding place with hungrily gleaming eyes.

17

"Remember, Eddie," he said in a hoarse voice, and then stepped forward. His body collapsed at the edge of the doorway, as if it had struck a stone wall instead of empty space.

Eddie felt an almost insatiable urge to go to the doorway, to look through and

see where—and to what when—it led. Instead he turned and scanned the hills again, his hand on the gun-butt.

I'm going to tell you one last time.

Suddenly, scanning the empty brown hills, Eddie was scared.

Be on your guard.

Nothing up there was moving.

Nothing he could see, at least.

He sensed her all the same.

Not Odetta; the gunslinger was right about that.

It was Delta he sensed.

He swallowed and heard a click in his throat.

On your guard.

Yes. But never in his life had he felt such a deadly need for sleep. It would take him soon enough; if he didn't give in willingly, sleep would rape him.

And while he slept, Delta would come.

Delta.

Eddie fought the weariness, looked at the unmoving hills with eyes which felt swollen and heavy, and wondered how long it might be before Roland came back with the third—The Pusher, whoever he or she was.

"Odetta?" he called without much hope.

Only silence answered, and for Eddie the lime of wailing began.

## CHAPTER 1 BITTER MEDICINE

1

When the gunslinger entered Eddie, Eddie had experienced a moment of nausea and he had had a sense of being watched (this Roland hadn't felt; Eddie had told him later). He'd had, in other words, some vague sense of the gunslinger's presence.

With Delta, Roland had been forced to come forward immediately, like it or not.

She hadn't just sensed him; in a queer way it seemed that she had been waiting for him—him or another, more frequent, visitor. Either way, she had been totally aware of his presence from the first moment he had been in her.

Jack Mort didn't feel a thing.

He was too intent on the boy.

He had been watching the boy for the last two weeks.

Today he was going to push him.

2

Even with the back to the eyes from which the gunslinger now looked, Roland recognized the boy. It was the boy he had met at the way station in the desert, the boy he had rescued from the Oracle in the Mountains, the boy whose life he

had sacrificed when the choice between saving him or finally catching up with the man in black finally came; the boy who had said Go then—there are other worlds than these before plunging into the abyss. And sure enough, the boy had been right.

The boy was Jake.

He was holding a plain brown paper bag in one hand and a blue canvas bag by its drawstring top in the other. From the angles poking against the sides of the canvas, the gunslinger thought it must contain books.

Traffic flooded the street the boy was waiting to cross—a street in the same city from which he had taken the Prisoner and the Lady, he realized, but for the moment none of that mattered. Nothing mattered but what was going to happen or not happen in the next few seconds.

Jake had not been brought into the gunslinger's world through any magic door; he had come through a cruder, more understandable portal: he had been born into Roland's world by dying in his own.

He had been murdered.

More specifically, he had been pushed.

Pushed into the street; run over by a car while on his way to school, his lunch-sack in one hand and his books in the other.

Pushed by the man in black.

He's going to do it! He's going to do it right now! That's to be my punishment for murdering him in my world—to see him murdered in this one before I can stop it!

But the rejection of brutish destiny had been the gunsling-er's work all his life—it had been his ka, if you pleased—and so he came forward without even thinking, acting with reflexes so deep they had nearly become instincts.

And as he did a thought both horrible and ironic flashed into his mind: What if the body he had entered was itself that of the man in black? What if, as he rushed forward to save the boy, he saw his own hands reach out and push? What if this sense of control was only an illusion, and Walter's final gleeful joke that Roland himself should murder the boy?

3

For one single moment Jack Mort lost the thin strong arrow of his concentration. On the edge of leaping forward and shoving the kid into the traffic, he felt something which his mind mistranslated just as the body may refer pain from one part of itself to another.

When the gunslinger came forward, Jack thought some sort of bug had landed on the back of his neck. Not a wasp or a bee, nothing that actually stung, but something that bit and itched. Mosquito, maybe. It was on this that he blamed his lapse in concentration at the crucial moment. He slapped at it and returned to the boy.

He thought all this happened in a bare wink; actually, seven seconds passed. He sensed neither the gunslinger's swift advance nor his equally swift retreat, and none of the people around him (going-to-work people, most from the subway station on the next block, their faces still puffy with sleep, their half-dreaming eyes turned inward) noticed Jack's eyes turn from their usual deep blue to a lighter blue behind the prim gold-rimmed glasses he wore. No one noticed those eyes darken to their normal cobalt color either, but when it

happened and he refocused on the boy, he saw with frustrated fury as sharp as a thorn that his chance was gone. The light had changed.

He watched the boy crossing with the rest of the sheep, and then Jack himself turned back the way he had come and began shoving himself upstream against the tidal flow of pedestrians.

"Hey, mister! Watch ou—"

Some curd-faced teenaged girl he barely saw. Jack shoved her aside, hard, not looking back at her caw of anger as her own armload of schoolbooks went flying. He went walking on down Fifth Avenue and away from Forty-Third, where he had meant for the boy to die today. His head was bent, his lips pressed together so tightly he seemed to have no mouth at all but only the scar of a long-healed wound above his chin. Once clear of the bottleneck at the corner, he did not slow down but strode even more rapidly along, crossing Forty-Second, Forty-First, Fortieth. Somewhere in the middle of the next block he passed the building where the boy lived. He gave it barely a glance, although he had followed the boy from it every school-morning for the last three weeks, followed him from the building to the corner three and a half blocks further up Fifth, the corner he thought of simply as the Pushing Place.

The girl he bumped was screaming after him, but Jack Mort didn't notice. An amateur lepidopterist would have taken no more notice of a common butterfly.

Jack was, in his way, much like an amateur lepidopterist.

By profession, he was a successful C.P.A.

Pushing was only his hobby.

4

The gunslinger returned to the back of the man's mind and fainted there. If there was relief, it was simply that this man was not the man in black, was not Walter.

All the rest was utter horror . . . and utter realization.

Divorced of his body, his mind—his ka—was as healthy and acute as ever, but the sudden knowing struck him like a chisel-blow to the temple.

The knowing didn't come when he went forward but when he was sure the boy was safe and slipped back again. He saw the connection between this man and Odetta, too fantastic and yet too hideously apt to be coincidental, and understood what the real drawing of the three might be, and who they might be.

The third was not this man, this Pusher; the third named by Walter had been Death.

Death. . . but not for you. That was what Walter, clever as Satan even at the end, had said. A lawyer's answer... so close to the truth that the truth was able to hide in its shadow. Death was not for him; death was become him.

The Prisoner, the Lady.

Death was the third.

He was suddenly filled with the certainty that he himself was the third.

5

Roland came forward as nothing but a projectile, a brain-less missile programmed to launch the body he was in at the man in black the instant he saw him.

Thoughts of what might happen if he stopped the man in black from murdering Jake

did not come until later—the possible paradox, the fistula in time and dimension which might cancel out everything that had happened after he had arrived at the way station. . . for surely if he saved Jake in this world, there would have been no Jake for him to meet there, and everything which had happened thereafter would change.

What changes? Impossible even to speculate on them. That one might have been the end of his quest never entered the gunslinger's mind. And surely such after-the-fact speculations were moot; if he had seen the man in black, no consequence, paradox, or ordained course of destiny could have stopped him from simply lowering the head of this body he inhabited and pounding it straight through Walter's chest. Roland would have been as helpless to do otherwise as a gun is helpless to refuse the finger that squeezes the trigger and flings the bullet on its flight.

If it sent all to hell, the hell with it.

He scanned the people clustered on the corner quickly, seeing each face (he scanned the women as closely as the men, making sure there wasn't one only pretending to be a woman).

Walter wasn't there.

Gradually he relaxed, as a finger curled around a trigger may relax at the last instant. No; Walter was nowhere around the boy, and the gunslinger somehow felt sure that this wasn't the right when. Not quite. That when was close—two weeks away, a week, maybe even a single day—but it was not quite yet.

So he went back.

On the way he saw . . .

6

. . . and fell senseless with shock: this man into whose mind the third door opened, had once sat waiting just inside the window of a deserted tenement room in a building full of abandoned rooms—abandoned, that was, except for the winos and crazies who often spent their nights here. You knew about the winos because you could smell their desperate sweat and angry piss. You knew about the crazies because you could smell the stink of their deranged thoughts. The only furniture in this room was two chairs. Jack Mort was using both: one to sit in, one as a prop to keep the door opening on the hallway closed. He expected no sudden interruptions, but it was best not to take chances. He was close enough to the window to look out, but far enough behind the slanted shadow-line to be safe from any casual viewer.

He had a crumbly red brick in his hand.

He had pried it from just outside the window, where a good many were loose. It was old, eroded at the corners, but heavy. Chunks of ancient mortar clung to it like barnacles.

The man meant to drop the brick on someone.

He didn't care who; when it came to murder, Jack Mort was an equal-opportunity employer.

After a bit, a family of three came along the sidewalk below: man, woman, little girl. The girl had been walking on the inside, presumably to keep her safely away from the traffic. There was quite a lot of it this close to the railway station but Jack Mort didn't care about the auto traffic. What he cared about was the lack of buildings directly opposite him; these had already been

demolished, leaving a jumbled wasteland of splintered board, broken brick, glinting glass.

He would only lean out for a few seconds, and he was wearing sunglasses over his eyes and an out-of-season knit cap over his blonde hair. It was like the chair under the doorknob. Even when you were safe from expected risks, there was no harm in reducing those unexpected ones which remained.

He was also wearing a sweatshirt much too big for him— one that came almost down to mid-thigh. This bag of a garment would help confuse the actual size and shape of his body (he was quite thin) should he be observed. It served another purpose as well: whenever he "depth-charged" someone (for that was how he always thought of it: as "depth-charging"), he came in his pants. The baggy sweatshirt also covered the wet spot which invariably formed on his jeans.

Now they were closer.

Don't jump the gun, wait, just wait. . .

He shivered at the edge of the window, brought the brick forward, drew it back to his stomach, brought it forward again, withdrew it again (but this time only halfway), and then leaned out, totally cool now. He always was at the penultimate moment.

He dropped the brick and watched it fall.

It went down, swapping one end for the other. Jack saw the clinging barnacles of mortar clearly in the sun. At these moments as at no others everything was clear, everything stood out with exact and geometrically perfect substance; here was a thing which he had pushed into reality, as a sculptor swings a hammer against a chisel to change stone and create some new substance from the brute caldera; here was the world's most remarkable thing: logic which was also ecstasy.

Sometimes he missed or struck aslant, as the sculptor may carve badly or in vain, but this was a perfect shot. The brick struck the girl in the bright gingham dress squarely on the head. He saw blood—it was brighter than the brick but would eventually dry to the same maroon color—splash up. He heard the start of the mother's scream. Then he was moving.

Jack crossed the room and threw the chair which had been under the knob into a far corner (he'd kicked the other—the one he'd sat in while waiting—aside as he crossed the room). He yanked up the sweatshirt and pulled a bandanna from his back pocket. He used it to turn the knob.

No fingerprints allowed.

Only Don't Bees left fingerprints.

He stuffed the bandanna into his back pocket again even as the door was swinging open. As he walked down the hall, he assumed a faintly drunken gait. He didn't look around.

Looking around was also only for Don't Bees.

Do Bees knew that trying to see if someone was noticing you was a sure way to accomplish just that. Looking around was the sort of thing a witness might remember after an accident. Then some smartass cop might decide it was a suspicious accident, and there would be an investigation. All because of one nervous glance around. Jack didn't believe anyone could connect him with the crime even if someone decided the "accident" was suspicious and there was an investigation, but. . .

Take only acceptable risks. Minimize those which remain.

In other words, always prop a chair under the doorknob.



So he walked down the powdery corridor where patches of lathing showed through the plastered walls, he walked with his head down, mumbling to himself like the vags you saw on the street. He could still hear the woman—the mother of the little girl, he supposed—screaming, but that sound was coming from the front of the building; it was faint and unimportant. All of the things which happened after—the cries, the confusion, the wails of the wounded (if the wounded were still capable of wailing), were not things which mattered to Jack. What mattered was the thing which pushed change into the ordinary course of things and sculpted new lines in the flow of lives . . . and, perhaps, the destinies not only of those struck, but of a widening circle around them, like ripples from a stone tossed into a still pond.

Who was to say that he had not sculpted the cosmos today, or might not at some future time?

God, no wonder he creamed his jeans!

He met no one as he went down the two flights of stairs but he kept up the act, swaying a little as he went but never reeling. A swayer would not be remembered. An ostentatious reeler might be. He muttered but didn't actually say anything a person might understand. Not acting at all would be better than hamming it up. He let himself out the broken rear door into an alley filled with refuse and broken bottles which twinkled galaxies of sun-stars.

He had planned his escape in advance as he planned everything in advance (take only acceptable risks, minimize those which remain, be a Do Bee in all things); such planning was why he had been marked by his colleagues as a man who would go far (and he did intend to go far, but one of the places he did not intend to go was to jail, or the electric chair).

A few people were running along the street into which the alley debouched, but they were on their way to see what the screaming was about, and none of them looked at Jack Mort, who had removed the out-of-season knit cap but not the sun-glasses (which, on such a bright morning, did not seem out of place).

He turned into another alley.

Came out on another street.

Now he sauntered down an alley not so filthy as the first two—almost, in fact, a lane. This fed into another street, and a block up there was a bus stop. Less than a minute after he got there a bus arrived, which was also part of the schedule. Jack entered when the doors accordioned open and dropped his fifteen cents into the slot of the coin receptacle. The driver did not so much as glance at him. That was good, but even if he had, he would have seen nothing but a nondescript man in jeans, a man who might be out of work—the sweatshirt he was wearing looked like something out of a Salvation Army grab-bag.

Be ready, be prepared, be a Do-Bee.

Jack Mort's secret for success both at work and at play.

Nine blocks away there was a parking lot. Jack got off the bus, entered the lot, unlocked his car (an unremarkable mid-fifties Chevrolet which was still in fine shape), and drove back to New York City.

He was free and clear.

The gunslinger saw all of this in a mere moment. Before his shocked mind could shut out the other images by simply shutting down, he saw more. Not all, but

enough. Enough.

8

He saw Mort cutting a piece from page four of The New York Daily Mirror with an Exacto knife, being fussily sure to stay exactly upon the lines of the column. NEGRO GIRL COM-ATOSE FOLLOWING TRAGIC ACCIDENT, the headline read. He saw Mort

apply glue to the back of the clipping with the brush attached to the cover of his paste-pot. Saw Mort position it at the center of a blank page of a scrapbook, which, from the bumpy, swelled look of the foregoing pages, contained many other clippings. He saw the opening lines of the piece: "Five-year-old Odetta Holmes, who came to Elizabethtown, N.J., to celebrate a joyous occasion, is now the victim of a cruel freak accident. Following the wedding of an aunt two days ago, the girl and her family were walking toward the railway station when a brick tumbled ..."

But that wasn't the only time he'd had dealings with her, was it? No. Gods, no. In the years between that morning and the night when Odetta had lost her legs, Jack Mort had dropped a great many things and pushed a great many people. Then there had been Odetta again.

The first time he had pushed something on her.

The second time he had pushed her in front of something.

What sort of man is this that I am supposed to use? What sort of man—

But then he thought of Jake, thought of the push which had sent Jake into this world, and he thought he heard the laughter of the man in black, and that finished him.

Roland fainted.

9

When he came to, he was looking at neat rows of figures marching down a sheet of green paper. The paper had been ruled both ways, so that each single figure looked like a prisoner in a cell.

He thought: Something else.

Not just Walter's laughter. Something—a plan?

No, Gods, no—nothing as complex or hopeful as that.

But an idea, at least. A tickle.

How long have I been out? he thought with sudden alarm. It was maybe nine o' the clock when I came through the door, maybe a little earlier. How long—?

He came forward.

Jack Mort—who was now only a human doll controlled by the gunslinger—looked up a little and saw the hands of the expensive quartz clock on his desk stood at quarter past one.

Gods, as late as that? As late as that? But Eddie. . . he was so tired, he can never have stayed awake for so I—

The gunslinger turned Jack's head. The door was still there, but what he saw through it was far worse, than he would have imagined.

Standing to one side of the door were two shadows, one that of the wheelchair, the other that of a human being. . . but the human being was incomplete, supporting itself on its arms because its lower legs had been snatched away with

the same quick brutality as Roland's fingers and toe.

The shadow moved.

Roland whipped Jack Mort's head away at once, moving with the whiplash speed of a striking snake.

She mustn't look in. Not until I am ready. Until then, she sees nothing but the back of this man's head.

Detta Walker would not see Jack Mort in any case, because the person who looked through the open door saw only what the host saw. She could only see Mort's face if he looked into a mirror (although that might lead to its own awful consequences of paradox and repetition), but even then it would mean nothing to either Lady; for that matter, the Lady's face would not mean anything to Jack Mort. Although they had twice been on terms of deadly intimacy, they had never seen each other.

What the gunslinger didn't want was for the Lady to see the Lady.

Not yet, at least.

The spark of intuition grew closer to a plan.

But it was late over there—the light had suggested to him that it must be three in the afternoon, perhaps even four.

How long until sunset brought the lobstrosities, and the end of Eddie's life?

Three hours?

Two?

He could go back and try to save Eddie . . . but that was exactly what Detta wanted. She had laid a trap, just as villagers who fear a deadly wolf may stake out a sacrificial lamb to draw it into bowshot. He would go back into his diseased body . . . but not for long. The reason he had seen only her shadow was because she was lying beside the door with one of his revolvers curled in her fist. The moment his Roland-body moved, she would shoot it and end his life. His ending, because she feared him, would at least be merciful.

Eddie's would be a screaming horror.

He seemed to hear Detta Walker's nasty, giggling voice:

You want to go at me, graymeat? Sho you want to go at me! You ain't afraid of no lil ole cripple black woman, are you?

"Only one way," Jack's mouth muttered. "Only one."

The door of the office opened, and a bald man with lenses over his eyes looked in.

"How are you doing on that Dorfman account?" the bald man asked.

"I feel ill. I think it was my lunch. I think I might leave."

The bald man looked worried. "It's probably a bug. I heard there's a nasty one going around."

"Probably."

"Well. . . as long as you get the Dorfman stuff finished by five tomorrow afternoon ..."

"Yes."

"Because you know what a dong he can be—"

"Yes."

The bald man, now looking a little uneasy, nodded. "Yes, go home. You don't seem like your usual self at all."

"I'm not."

The bald man went out the door in a hurry.

He sensed me, the gunslinger thought. That was part of it. Part, but not all.

They're afraid of him. They don't know why, but they're afraid of him. And they're right to be afraid.

Jack Mort's body got up, found the briefcase the man had been carrying when the gunslinger entered him, and swept all the papers on the surface of the desk into it.

He felt an urge to sneak a look back at the door and resisted it. He would not look again until he was ready to risk everything and come back.

In the meantime, time was short and there were things which had to be done.

## CHAPTER 2 THE HONEYPOT

1

Detta laid up in a deeply shadowed cleft formed by rocks which leaned together like old men who had been turned to stone while sharing some weird secret. She watched Eddie range up and down the rubble-strewn slopes of the hills, yelling himself hoarse. The duck-fuzz on his cheeks was finally becoming a beard, and you might have taken him for a growed man except for the three or four times he passed close to her (once he had come close enough for her to have snaked a hand out and grabbed his ankle). When he got close you saw he wasn't nothing but a kid still, and one who was dog tired to boot.

Odetta would have felt pity; Detta felt only the still, coiled readiness of the natural predator.

When she first crawled in here she had felt things crack-ling under her hands like old autumn leaves in a woods holler. As her eyes adjusted she saw they weren't leaves but the tiny bones of small animals. Some predator, long gone if these ancient yellow bones told the truth, had once denned here, something like a weasel or a ferret. It had perhaps gone out at night, following its nose further up into The Drawers to where the trees and undergrowth were thicker—following its nose to prey. It had killed, eaten, and brought the remains back here to snack on the following day as it laid up, waiting for night to bring the time of hunting on again.

Now there was a bigger predator here, and at first Detta thought she'd do pretty much what the previous tenant had done: wait until Eddie fell asleep, as he was almost certain to do, then kill him and drag his body up here. Then, with both guns in her possession, she could drag herself back down by the doorway and wait for the Really Bad Man to come back. Her first thought had been to kill the Really Bad Man's body as soon as she had taken care of Eddie, but that was no good, was it? If the Really Bad Man had no body to come back to, there would be no way Detta could get out of here and back to her own world.

Could she make that Really Bad Man take her back?

Maybe not.

But maybe so.

If he knew Eddie was still alive, maybe so.

And that led to a much better idea.

She was deeply sly. She would have laughed harshly at anyone daring to suggest it, but she was also deeply insecure. Because of the latter, she attributed the former to anyone she met whose intellect seemed to approach her own. This was how she felt about the gunslinger. She had heard a shot, and when she looked she'd seen smoke drifting from the muzzle of his remaining gun. He had reloaded and tossed this gun to Eddie just before going through the door.

She knew what it was supposed to mean to Eddie: all the shells weren't wet after all; the gun would protect him. She also knew what it was supposed to mean to her (for of course the Really Bad Man had known she was watching; even if she had been sleeping when the two of them started chinning, the shot would have awakened her): Stay away from him. He's packing iron.

But devils could be subtle.

It that little show had been put on for her benefit, might not that Really Bad Man have had another purpose in mind as well, one neither she nor Eddie was supposed to see? Might that Really Bad Man not have been thinking if she sees this one fires good shells, why, she'll think the one she took from Eddie does, too.

But suppose he had guessed that Eddie would doze off? Wouldn't he know she would be waiting for just that, waiting to filch the gun and creep slowly away up the slopes to safety?

Yes, that Really Bad Man might have foreseen all that. He was smart for a honky. Smart enough, anyway, to see that Detta was bound to get the best of that little white boy.

So just maybe that Really Bad Man had purposely loaded this gun with bad shells. He had fooled her once; why not again? This time she had been careful to check that the chambers were loaded with more than empty casings, and yes, they appeared to be real bullets, but that didn't mean they were. He didn't even have to take the chance that one of them might be dry enough to fire, now did he? He could have fixed them somehow. After all, guns were the Really Bad Man's business. Why would he do that? Why, to trick her into show-ing herself, of course! Then Eddie could cover her with the gun that really did work, and he would not make the same mistake twice, tired or not. He would, in fact, be especially careful not to make the same mistake twice because he was tired.

Nice try, honky, Detta thought in her shadowy den, this tight but somehow comforting dark place whose floor was carpeted with the softened and decaying bones of small anim-als. Nice try, but I ain't goin fo dat shit.

She didn't need to shoot Eddie, after all; she only needed to wait.

Her one fear was that the gunslinger would return before Eddie fell asleep, but he was still gone. The limp body at the base of the door did not stir. Maybe he was having some trouble getting the medicine he needed—some other kind of trouble, for all she knew. Men like him seemed to find trouble easy as a bitch in heat finds a randy hound.

Two hours passed while Eddie hunted for the woman he called "Odetta" (oh how she hated the sound of that name), ranging up and down the low hills and yelling until he had no voice left to yell with.

At last Eddie did what she had been waiting for: he went back down to the little angle of beach and sat by the wheel-chair, looking around disconsolately. He touched one of the chair's wheels, and the touch was almost a caress. Then his hand dropped away and he fetched him a deep sigh.

This sight brought a steely ache to Delta's throat; pain bolted across her head from one side to the other like summer lightning and she seemed to hear a voice calling. . . calling or demanding.

No you don't, she thought, having no idea who she was thinking about or speaking to. No you don't, not this time, not now. Not now, may be not ever again. That bolt of pain ripped through her head again and she curled her hands into fists. Her face made its own fist, twisting itself into a sneer of concentration—an expression remarkable and arresting in its mixture of ugliness and almost beatific determination.

That bolt of pain did not come again. Neither did the voice which sometimes seemed to speak through such pains.

She waited.

Eddie propped his chin on his fists, propping his head up. Soon it began to droop anyway, the fists sliding up his cheeks. Delta waited, black eyes gleaming.

Eddie's head jerked up. He struggled to his feet, walked down to the water, and splashed his face with it.

Dot's right, white boy. Crine shame there ain't any No-Doz in this worl or you be takin dat too, ain't dat right?

Eddie sat down in the wheelchair this time, but evidently found that just a little too comfortable. So, after a long look through the open door (what you seem in dere, white boy? Delta give a twenty-dollar bill to know dat), he plopped his ass down on the sand again.

Propped his head with his hands again.

Soon his head began to slip down again.

This time there was no stopping it. His chin lay on his chest, and even over the surf she could hear him snoring. Pretty soon he fell over on his side and curled up.

She was surprised, disgusted, and frightened to feel a sudden stab of pity for the white boy down there. He looked like nothing so much as a little squirt who had tried to stay up until midnight on New Years' Eve and lost the race. Then she remembered the way he and the Really Bad Man had tried to get her to eat poison food and teased her with their own, always snatching away at the last second... at least until they got scared she might die.

If they were scared you might die, why'd they try to get you to eat poison in the first place?

The question scared her the way that momentary feeling of pity had scared her. She wasn't used to questioning herself, and furthermore, the questioning voice in her mind didn't seem like her voice at all.

Wadn't meanin to kill me wid dat poison food. Jes wanted to make me sick. Set there and laugh while I puked an moaned, I speck.

She waited twenty minutes and then started down toward the beach, pulling herself with her hands and strong arms, weaving like a snake, eyes never leaving Eddie. She would have preferred to have waited another hour, even another half; it would be better to have the little mahfah ten miles asleep instead of one or two. But waiting was a luxury she simply could not afford. That Really Bad Man

might come back anytime.

As she drew near the place where Eddie lay (he was still snoring, sounded like a buzzsaw in a sawmill about to go tits up), she picked up a chunk of rock that was satisfyingly smooth on one side and satisfyingly jagged on the other. She closed her palm over the smooth side and continued her snake-crawl to where he lay, the flat sheen of murder in her eyes.

4

What Detta planned to do was brutally simple: smash Eddie with the jagged side of the rock until he was as dead as the rock itself. Then she'd take the gun and wait for Roland to come back.

When his body sat up, she would give him a choice: take her back to her world or refuse and be killed. You goan be quits wid me either way, toots, she would say, and wit yo boyfrien dead, ain't nothin more you can do like you said you wanted to.

If the gun the Really Bad Man had given Eddie didn't work—it was possible; she had never met a man she hated and feared as much as Roland, and she put no depth of slyness past him—she would do him just the same. She would do him with the rock or with her bare hands. He was sick and shy two fingers to boot. She could take him.

But as she approached Eddie, a disquieting thought came to her. It was another question, and again it seemed to be another voice that asked it.

What if he knows? What if he knows what you did the second you kill Eddie? He ain't goan know nuthin. He be too busy gittin his medicine. Gittin hisself laid, too, for all I know.

The alien voice did not respond, but the seed of doubt had been planted. She had heard them talking when they thought she was asleep. The Really Bad Man needed to do something. She didn't know what it was. Had something to do with a tower was all Detta knew. Could be the Really Bad Man thought this tower was full of gold or jewels or something like that. He said he needed her and Eddie and some other one to get there, and Detta guessed maybe he did. Why else would these doors be here?

If it was magic and she killed Eddie, he might know. If she killed his way to the tower, she thought she might be killing the only thing graymeat mahfah was living for. And if he knew he had nothing to live for, mahfah might do anything, because the mahfah wouldn't give a bug-turd for nothin no more.

The idea of what might happen if the Really Bad Man came back like that made Detta shiver.

But if she couldn't kill Eddie, what was she going to do? She could take the gun while Eddie was asleep, but when the Really Bad Man came back, could she handle both of them?

She just didn't know.

Her eyes touched on the wheelchair, started to move away, then moved back again, fast. There was a deep pocket in the leather backrest. Poking out of this was a curl of the rope they had used to tie her into the chair.

Looking at it, she understood how she could do every-thing.

Detta changed course and began to crawl toward the gunslinger's inert body. She meant to take what she needed from the knapsack he called his "purse," then get the rope, fast as she could . . . but for a moment she was held frozen by the

door.

Like Eddie, she interpreted what she was seeing in terms of the movies . . . only this looked more like some TV crime show. The setting was a drug-store. She was seeing a druggist who looked scared silly, and Detta didn't blame him. There was a gun pointing straight into the druggist's face. The druggist was saying something, but his voice was distant, distorted, as if heard through sound-baffles. She couldn't tell what it was. She couldn't see who was holding the gun, either, but then, she didn't really need to see the stick-up man, did she? She knew who it was, sho.

It was the Really Bad Man.

Might not look like him over there, might look like some tubby little sack of shit, might even look like a brother, but inside it be him, sho. Didn't take him long to find another gun, did it? I bet it never does. You get movin, Detta Walker.

She opened Roland's purse, and the faint, nostalgic aroma of tobacco long hoarded but now long gone drifted out. In one way it was very much like a lady's purse, filled with what looked like so much random rickrack at first glance. . . but a closer look showed you the travelling gear of a man prepared for almost any contingency.

She had an idea the Really Bad Man had been on the road to his Tower a good long time. If that was so, just the amount of stuff still left in here, poor as some of it was, was cause for amazement.

You get movin, Detta Walker.

She got what she needed and worked her silent, snakelike way back to the wheelchair. When she got there she propped herself on one arm and pulled the rope out of the pocket like a fisherwoman reeling in line. She glanced over at Eddie every now and then just to make sure he was asleep.

He never stirred until Detta threw the noose around his neck and pulled it taut.

5

He was dragged backward, at first thinking he was still asleep and this was some horrible nightmare of being buried alive or perhaps smothered.

Then he felt the pain of the noose sinking into his throat, felt warm spit running down his chin as he gagged. This was no dream. He clawed at the rope and tried for his feet.

She yanked him hard with her strong arms. Eddie fell on his back with a thud. His face was turning purple.

"Quit on it!" Detta hissed from behind him. "I ain't goan kill you if you quit on it, but if you don't, I'm goan choke you dead."

Eddie lowered his hands and tried to be still. The running slipknot Odetta had tossed over his neck loosened enough for him to draw a thin, burning breath. All you could say for it was that it was better than not breathing at all.

When the panicked beating of his heart had slowed a little, he tried to look around. The noose immediately drew tight again.

"Nev' mind. You jes go on an take in dat ocean view, graymeat. Dat's all you want to be lookin at right now."

He looked back at the ocean and the knot loosened enough to allow him those miserly burning breaths again. His left hand crept surreptitiously down to the waistband of his pants (but she saw the movement, and although he didn't know



it, she was grinning). There was nothing there. She had taken the gun. She crept up on you while you were asleep, Eddie. It was the gunslinger's voice, of course. It doesn't do any good to say I told you so now, but. . . I told you so. This is what romance gets you—a noose around your neck and a crazy woman with two guns somewhere behind you.

But if she was going to kill me, she already would have done it. She would have done it while I was asleep.

And what is it you think she's going to do, Eddie? Hand you an all-expenses-paid trip for two to Disney World?

"Listen," he said. "Odetta—"

The word was barely out of his mouth before the noose pulled savagely tight again.

"You doan want to be callin me dat. Nex time you be callin me dat be de las time you be callin anyone anythin. My name's Detta Walker, and if you want to keep drawin breaf into yo lungs, you little piece of whitewashed shit, you better member it!"

Eddie made choking, gagging noises and clawed at the noose. Big black spots of nothing began to explode in front of his eyes like evil flowers.

At last the choking band around his throat eased again.

"Got dat, honky?"

"Yes," he said, but it was only a hoarse choke of sound.

"Den say it. Say my name."

"Detta."

"Say my whole name!" Dangerous hysteria wavered in her voice, and at that moment Eddie was glad he couldn't see her.

"Detta Walker."

"Good." The noose eased a little more. "Now you lissen to me, whitebread, and you do it good, if you want to live til sundown. You don't want to be trine to be cute, like I seen you jus trine t'snake down an git dat gun I took off'n you while you was asleep. You don't want to cause Detta, she got the sight. See what you goan try befo you try it. Sho.

"You don't want to try nuthin cute cause I ain't got no legs, either. I have learned to do a lot of things since I lost em, and now I got both o dat honky mahfah's guns, and dat ought to go for somethin. You think so?"

"Yeah," Eddie croaked. "I'm not feeling cute."

"Well, good. Dat's real good." She cackled. "I been one busy bitch while you been sleepin. Got dis bidness all figured out. Here's what I want you to do, whitebread: put yo hands behin you and feel aroun until you find a loop j us like d'one I got roun yo neck. There be three of em. I been braidin while you been sleepin, lazybones!" She cackled again. "When you feel dat loop, you goan put yo wrists right one against t'other an slip em through it.

"Den you goan feel my hand pullin that runnin knot tight, and when you feel dat, you goan say 'Dis my chance to toin it aroun on disyere nigger bitch. Right here, while she ain't got her good hold on dat jerk-rope.' But—" Here Delta's voice became muffled as well as a Southern darkie caricature. "—you better take a look aroun befo you go doin anythin rash."

Eddie did. Detta looked more witchlike than ever, a dirty, matted thing that would have struck tear into hearts much stouter than his own. The dress she had been wearing in Macy's when the gunslinger snatched her was now filthy and torn. She'd used the knife she had taken from the gunslinger's purse—the one he and

Roland had used to cut the masking tape away—to slash her dress in two other places, creating makeshift holsters just above the swell of her hips. The worn butts of the gunslinger's revolvers protruded from them.

Her voice was muffled because the end of the rope was clenched in her teeth. A freshly cut end protruded from one side of her grin; the rest of the line, the part which led to the noose around his neck, protruded from the other side.

There was something so predatory and barbaric about this image—the rope caught in the grin—that he was frozen, staring at her with a horror that only made her grin widen.

"You try to be cute while I be takin care of yo hans," she said in her muffled voice, "I goanjoik yo win'pipe shut wif my teef, graymeat. And dat time I not be lettin up agin. You understan?"

He didn't trust himself to speak. He only nodded.

"Good. Maybe you be livin a little bit longer after all."

"If I don't," Eddie croaked, "you're never going to have the pleasure of shoplifting in Macy's again, Detta. Because he'll know, and then it'll be everybody out of the pool."

"Hush up," Detta said. . . almost crooned. "You jes hush up. Leave the thinkin to the folks dat kin do it. All you got to do is be feelin aroun fo dat next loop."

6

I been braidin while you been sleepin, she had said, and with disgust and mounting alarm, Eddie discovered she meant exactly what she said. The rope had become a series of three running slip-knots. The first she had noosed around his neck as he slept. The second secured his hands behind his back.

Then she pushed him roughly over on his side and told him to bring his feet up until his heels touched his butt. He saw where this was leading and balked. She pulled one of Roland's revolvers from the slit in her dress, cocked it, and pressed the muzzle against Eddie's temple.

"You do it or I do it, graymeat," she said in that crooning voice. "Only if I do it, you goan be dead when I do. I jes kick some san' over de brains dat squoit out d'other side yo haid, cover de hole wit yo hair. He think you be sleepin!" She cackled again.

Eddie brought his feet up, and she quickly secured the third running slip-knot around his ankles.

"There. Trussed up just as neat as a calf at a ro-day-o."

That described it as well as anything, Eddie thought. If he tried to bring his feet down from a position which was already growing uncomfortable, he would tighten the slipknot hold-ing his ankles even more. That would tighten the length of rope between his ankles and his wrists, which would in turn tighten that slipknot, and the rope between his wrists and the noose she'd put around his neck, and . . .

She was dragging him, somehow dragging him down the beach.

"Hey! What—"

He tried to pull back and felt everything tighten— including his ability to draw breath. He let himself go as limp as possible (and keep those feet up, don't forget that, asshole, because if you lower your feet enough you're going to

strangle) and let her drag him along the rough ground. A jag of rock peeled skin away from his cheek, and he felt warm blood begin to flow. She was panting harshly. The sound of the waves and the boom of surf ramming into the rock tunnel were louder.

Drown me? Sweet Christ, is that what she means to do?

No, of course not. He thought he knew what she meant to do even before his face plowed through the twisted kelp which marked the high tide line, dead salt-stinking stuff as cold as the fingers of drowned sailors.

He remembered Henry saying once, Sometimes they'd shoot one of our guys. An American, I mean—they knew an ARVN was no good, because wasn't any of us that'd go after a gook in the bush. Not unless he was some fresh fish just over from the States. They'd guthole him, leave him screaming, then pick off the guys that tried to save him. They'd keep doing that until the guy died. You know what they called a guy like that, Eddie?

Eddie had shaken his head, cold with the vision of it.

They called him a honey-pot, Henry had said. Something sweet. Something to draw flies. Or maybe even a bear.

That's what Detta was doing: using him as a honeypot.

She left him some seven feet below the high tide line, left him without a word, left him facing the ocean. It was not the tide coming in to drown him that the gunslinger, looking through the door, was supposed to see, because the tide was on the ebb and wouldn't get up this far again for another six hours. And long before then . . .

Eddie rolled his eyes up a little and saw the sun striking a long gold track across the ocean. What was it? Four o'clock? About that. Sunset would come around seven.

It would be dark long before he had to worry about the tide.

And when dark came, the lobstrosities would come rol-ling out of the waves; they would crawl their questioning way up the beach to where he lay helplessly trussed, and then they would tear him apart.

7

That time stretched out interminably for Eddie Dean. The idea of time itself became a joke. Even his horror of what was going to happen to him when it got dark faded as his legs began to throb with a discomfort which worked its way up the scale of feeling to pain and finally to shrieking agony. He would relax his muscles, all the knots would pull tight, and when he was on the verge of strangling he would manage somehow to pull his ankles up again, releasing the pressure, allowing some breath to return. He was no longer sure he could make it to dark. There might come a time when he would simply be unable to bring his legs back up.

### CHAPTER 3 ROLAND TAKES HIS MEDICINE

1

Now Jack Mort knew the gunslinger was here. If he had been another person—an Eddie Dean or an Odetta Walker, for instance—Roland would have held palaver with the man, if only to ease his natural panic and confusion at suddenly finding one's self shoved rudely into the passenger seat of the body one's brain had driven one's whole life.

But because Mort was a monster—worse, than Detta Walker ever had been or could be—he made no effort to explain or speak at all. He could hear the man's clamorings— Who are you? What's happening to me?—but disregarded them. The gunslinger concentrated on his short list of necessities, using the man's mind with no compunction at all. The clamorings became screams of terror. The gunslinger went right on disregarding them.

The only way he could remain in the worm-pit which was this man's mind was to regard him as no more than a combination atlas and encyclopedia. Mort had all the information Roland needed. The plan he made was rough, but rough was often better than smooth. When it came to planning, there were no creatures in the universe more different than Roland and Jack Mort.

When you planned rough, you allowed room for improvisation. And improvisation at short notice had always been one of Roland's strong points.

2

A fat man with lenses over his eyes, like the bald man who had poked his head into Mort's office five minutes earlier (it seemed that in Eddie's world many people wore these, which his Mortyclopedia identified as "glasses"), got into the elevator with him. He looked at the briefcase in the hand of the man who he believed to be Jack Mort and then at Mort himself.

"Going to see Dorfman, Jack?"

The gunslinger said nothing.

"If you think you can talk him out of sub-leasing, I can tell you it's a waste of time," the fat man said, then blinked as his colleague took a quick step backward. The doors of the little box closed and suddenly they were falling. He clawed at Mort's mind, ignoring the screams, and found this was all right. The fall was controlled.

"If I spoke out of turn, I'm sorry," the fat man said. The gunslinger thought: This one is afraid, too. "You've handled the jerk better than anyone else in the firm, that's what I think."

The gunslinger said nothing. He waited only to be out of this falling coffin.

"I say so, too," the fat man continued eagerly. "Why, just yesterday I was at lunch with—"

Jack Mort's head turned, and behind Jack Mort's gold-rimmed glasses, eyes that seemed a somehow different shade of blue than Jack's eyes had ever been before stared at the fat man. "Shut up," the gunslinger said tonelessly.

Color fell from the fat man's face and he took two quick steps backward. His flabby buttocks smacked the fake wood panels at the back of the little moving coffin, which suddenly stopped. The doors opened and the gunslinger, wearing Jack Mort's body like a tight-fitting set of clothes, stepped out with no look back. The fat man held his finger on the DOOR OPEN button of the elevator and waited inside until Mort was out of sight. Always did have a screw loose, the fat man thought, but this could be serious. This could be a breakdown.

The fat man found that the idea of Jack Mort tucked safely away in a sanitarium

somewhere was very comforting.  
The gunslinger wouldn't have been surprised.

3

Somewhere between the echoing room which his Mort-cyclopedia identified as a lobby, to wit, a place of entry and exit from the offices which filled this sky-tower, and the bright sunshine of street (his Mortyclopedia identified this street as both 6th Avenue and Avenue of the Americas), the screaming of Roland's host stopped. Mort had not died of fright; the gunslinger felt with a deep instinct which was the same as knowing that if Mort died, their kas would be expelled forever, into that void of possibility which lay beyond all physical worlds. Not dead—fainted. Fainted at the overload of terror and strangeness, as Roland himself had done upon entering the man's mind and discovering its secrets and the crossing of destinies too great to be coincidence.

He was glad Mort had fainted. As long as the man's unconsciousness hadn't affected Roland's access to the man's knowledge and memories—and it hadn't—he was glad to have him out of the way.

The yellow cars were public conveyances called Tack-Sees or Cabs or Hax. The tribes which drove them, the Mortyclopedia told him, were two: Spix and Mockies. To make one stop, you held your hand up like a pupil in a classroom.

Roland did this, and after several Tack-Sees which were obviously empty save for their drivers had gone by him, he saw that these had signs which read Off-Duty. Since these were Great Letters, the gunslinger didn't need Mort's help. He waited, then put his hand up again. This time the Tack-See pulled over. The gunslinger got into the back seat. He smelled old smoke, old sweat, old perfume. It smelled like a coach in his own world.

"Where to, my friend?" the driver asked—Roland had no idea if he was of the Spix or Mockies tribe, and had no intention of asking. It might be impolite in this world.

"I'm not sure," Roland said.

"This ain't no encounter group, my friend. Time is money."

Tell him to put his flag down, the Mortyclopedia told him.

"Put your flag down," Roland said.

"That ain't rolling nothing but time," the driver replied.

Tell him you'll tip him five bux, the Mortyclopedia advised.

"I'll tip you five bucks," Roland said.

"Let's see it," the cabbie replied. "Money talks, bullshit walks."

Ask him if he wants the money or if he wants to go fuck himself, the Mortyclopedia advised instantly.

"Do you want the money, or do you want to go fuck yourself?" Roland asked in a cold, dead voice.

The cabbie's eyes glanced apprehensively into the rear-view mirror for just a moment, and he said no more.

Roland consulted Jack Mort's accumulated store of knowledge more fully this time. The cabbie glanced up again, quickly, during the fifteen seconds his fare spent simply sit-ting there with his head slightly lowered and his left hand spread across his brow, as if he had an Excedrin Headache. The cabbie had decided to tell the guy to get out or he'd yell for a cop when the fare looked up and said mildly, "I'd like you to take me to Seventh Avenue and Forty-Ninth

street. For this trip I will pay you ten dollars over the fare on your taxi meter, no matter what your tribe."

A weirdo, the driver (a WASP from Vermont trying to break into showbiz) thought, but maybe a rich weirdo. He dropped the cab into gear. "We're there, buddy," he said, and pulling into traffic he added mentally, And the sooner the better.

4

Improvise. That was the word.

The gunslinger saw the blue-and-white parked down the block when he got out, and read Police as Posse without checking Mort's store of knowledge. Two gunslingers inside, drinking something—coffee, maybe—from white paper glasses. Gunslingers, yes—but they looked fat and lax.

He reached into Jack Mort's wallet (except it was much too small to be a real wallet; a real wallet was almost as big as a purse and could carry all of a man's things, if he wasn't travelling too heavy) and gave the driver a bill with the number 20 on it. The cabbie drove away fast. It was easily the biggest tip he'd make that day, but the guy was so freaky he felt he had earned every cent of it.

The gunslinger looked at the sign over the shop. CLEMENTS GUNS AND SPORTING GOODS, it said. AMMO, FISHING TACKLE, OFFICIAL FACSIMILES.

He didn't understand all of the words, but one look in the window was all it took for him to see Mort had brought him to the right place. There were wristbands on display, badges of rank . . . and guns. Rifles, mostly, but pistols as well. They were chained, but that didn't matter.

He would know what he needed when—if—he saw it. Roland consulted Jack Mort's mind—a mind exactly sly enough to suit his purposes—for more than a minute.

5

One of the cops in the blue-and-white elbowed the other. "Now that," he said, "is a serious comparison shopper."

His partner laughed. "Oh God," he said in an effeminate voice as the man in the business suit and gold-rimmed glasses finished his study of the merchandise on display and went inside. "I think he jutht dethided on the lavender hand-cuffths."

The first cop choked on a mouthful of lukewarm coffee and sprayed it back into the styrofoam cup in a gust of laughter.

6

A clerk came over almost at once and asked if he could be of help.

"I wonder," the man in the conservative blue suit replied, "if you have a paper ..." He paused, appeared to think deeply, and then looked up. "A chart, I mean, which shows pictures of revolver ammunition."

"You mean a caliber chart?" the clerk asked.

The customer paused, then said, "Yes. My brother has a revolver. I have fired it, but it's been a good many years. I think I will know the bullets if I see them."

"Well, you may think so," the clerk replied, "but it can be hard to tell. Was it

a .22? A .38? Or maybe—"

"If you have a chart, I'll know," Roland said.

"Just a sec." The clerk looked at the man in the blue suit doubtfully for a moment, then shrugged. Fuck, the customer was always right, even when he was wrong ... if he had the dough to pay, that was. Money talked, bullshit walked.

"I got a Shooter's Bible. Maybe that's what you ought to look at."

"Yes." He smiled. Shooter's Bible. It was a noble name for a book.

The man rummaged under the counter and brought out a well-thumbed volume as thick as any book the gunslinger had ever seen in his life—and yet this man seemed to handle it as if it were no more valuable than a handful of stones.

He opened it on the counter and turned it around. "Take a look. Although if it's been years, you're shootin' in the dark." He looked surprised, then smiled.

"Pardon my pun."

Roland didn't hear. He was bent over the book, studying pictures which seemed almost as real as the things they represented, marvellous pictures the Mortcyclopedia identified as Fotergraffs.

He turned the pages slowly. No ... no ... no ...

He had almost lost hope when he saw it. He looked up at the clerk with such blazing excitement that the clerk felt a little afraid.

"There!" he said. "There! Right there!"

The photograph he was tapping was one of a Winchester .45 pistol shell. It was not exactly the same as his own shells, because it hadn't been hand-thrown or hand-loaded, but he could see without even consulting the figures (which would have meant almost nothing to him anyway) that it would chamber and fire from his guns.

"Well, all right, I guess you found it," the clerk said, "but don't cream your jeans, fella. I mean, they're just bullets."

"You have them?"

"Sure. How many boxes do you want?"

"How many in a box?"

"Fifty." The clerk began to look at the gunslinger with real suspicion. If the guy was planning to buy shells, he must know he'd have to show a Permit to Carry photo-I.D. No P.C., no ammo, not for handguns; it was the law in the borough of Manhattan. And if this dude had a handgun permit, how come he didn't know how many shells came in a standard box of ammo?

"Fifty!" Now the guy was staring at him with slack-jawed surprise. He was off the wall, all right.

The clerk edged a bit to his left, a bit nearer the cash register. . . and, not so coincidentally, a bit nearer to his own gun, a .357 Mag which he kept fully loaded in a spring clip under the counter.

"Fifty!" the gunslinger repeated. He had expected five, ten, perhaps as many as a dozen, but this . . . this . . .

How much money do you have? he asked the Mortcyclopedia. The Mortcyclopedia didn't know, not exactly, but thought there was at least sixty bux in his wallet.

"And how much does a box cost?" It would be more than sixty dollars, he supposed, but the man might be persuaded to sell him part of a box, or—

"Seventeen-fifty," the clerk said. "But, mister—"

Jack Mort was an accountant, and this time there was no waiting; translation and answer came simultaneously.

"Three," the gunslinger said. "Three boxes." He tapped the Fotergraff of the

shells with one finger. One hundred and fifty rounds! Ye gods! What a mad storehouse of riches this world was!

The clerk wasn't moving.

"You don't have that many," the gunslinger said. He felt no real surprise. It had been too good to be true. A dream.

"Oh, I got Winchester .45s I got .45s up the kazoo." The clerk took another step to the left, a step closer to the cash register and the gun. If the guy was a nut, something the clerk expected to find out for sure any second now, he was soon going to be a nut with an extremely large hole in his midsection. "I got .45 ammo up the old ying-yang. What I want to know, mister, is if you got the card."

"Card?"

"A handgun permit with a photo. I can't sell you hand-gun ammo unless you can show me one. If you want to buy ammo without a P.C., you're gonna hafta go up to Westchester."

The gunslinger stared at the man blankly. This was all gabble to him. He understood none of it. His Mortcyclopedia had some vague notion of what the man meant, but Mort's ideas were too vague to be trusted in this case. Mort had never owned a gun in his life. He did his nasty work in other ways.

The man sidled another step to the left without taking his eyes from his customer's face and the gunslinger thought: He's got a gun. He expects me to make trouble ... or maybe he wants me to make trouble. Wants an excuse to shoot me.

Improvise.

He remembered the gunslingers sitting in their blue and white carriage down the street. Gunslingers, yes, peace-keepers, men charged with keeping the world from moving on. But these had looked—at least on a passing glance—to be nearly as soft and unobservant as everyone else in this world of lotus-eaters; just two men in uniforms and caps, slouched down in the seats of their carriage, drinking coffee. He might have misjudged. He hoped for all their sakes—that he had not.

"Oh! I understand," the gunslinger said, and drew an apologetic smile on Jack Mort's face. "I'm sorry. I guess I haven't kept track of how much the world has moved on—changed—since I last owned a gun."

"No harm done," the clerk said, relaxing minutely. Maybe the guy was all right. Or maybe he was pulling a gag.

"I wonder if I could look at that cleaning kit?" Roland pointed to a shelf behind the clerk.

"Sure." The clerk turned to get it, and when he did, the gunslinger removed the wallet from Mort's inside jacket pocket. He did this with the flickering speed of a fast draw. The clerk's back was to him for less than four seconds, but when he turned back to Mort, the wallet was on the floor.

"It's a beaut," the clerk said, smiling, having decided the guy was okay after all. Hell, he knew how lousy you felt when you made a horse's ass of yourself. He had done it in the Marines enough times. "And you don't need a goddam permit to buy a cleaning kit, either. Ain't freedom wonderful?"

"Yes," the gunslinger said seriously, and pretended to look closely at the cleaning kit, although a single glance was enough to show him that it was a shoddy thing in a shoddy box. While he looked, he carefully pushed Mort's wallet under the counter with his foot.

After a moment he pushed it back with a passable show of regret. "I'm afraid



I'll have to pass."

"All right," the clerk said, losing interest abruptly. Since the guy wasn't crazy and was obviously a looker, not a buyer, their relationship was at an end. Bullshit walks. "Anything else?" His mouth asked while his eyes told blue-suit to get out.

"No, thank you." The gunslinger walked out without a look back. Mort's wallet was deep under the counter. Roland had set out his own honeypot.

7

Officers Carl Delevan and George O'Mearah had finished their coffee and were about to move on when the man in the blue suit came out of Clements'—which both cops believed to be a powderhorn (police slang for a legal gunshop which sometimes sells guns to independent stick-up men with proven credentials and which does business, sometimes in bulk, to the Mafia), and approached their squad car.

He leaned down and looked in the passenger side window at O'Mearah. O'Mearah expected the guy to sound like a fruit—probably as fruity as his routine about the lavender handcuffths had suggested, but a pouf all the same. Guns aside, Clements' did a lively trade in handcuffs. These were legal in Manhattan, and most of the people buying them weren't amateur Houdinis (the cops didn't like it, but when had what the cops thought on any given subject ever changed things?). The buyers were homos with a little taste for s & m. But the man didn't sound like a fag at all. His voice was flat and expressionless, polite but somehow dead.

"The tradesman in there took my wallet," he said.

"Who?" O'Mearah straightened up fast. They had been itching to bust Justin Clements for a year and a half. If it could be done, maybe the two of them could finally swap these bluesuits for detective's badges. Probably just a pipe-dream—this was too good to be true—but just the same . . .

"The tradesman. The—" A brief pause. "The clerk."

O'Mearah and Carl Delevan exchanged a glance.

"Black hair?" Delevan asked. "On the stocky side?"

Again there was the briefest pause. "Yes. His eyes were brown. Small scar under one of them."

There was something about the guy . . . O'Mearah couldn't put his finger on it then, but remembered later on, when there weren't so many other things to think about. The chief of which, of course, was the simple fact that the gold detective's badge didn't matter; it turned out that just holding onto the jobs they had would be a pure brassy-ass miracle.

But years later there was a brief moment of epiphany when O'Mearah took his two sons to the Museum of Science in Boston. They had a machine there—a computer—that played tic-tac-toe, and unless you put your X in the middle square on your first move, the machine fucked you over every time. But there was always a pause as it checked its memory for all possible gambits. He and his boys had been fascinated. But there was something spooky about it... and then he remembered Blue-Suit. He remembered because Blue-Suit had had that some fucking habit. Talking to him had been like talking to a robot.

Delevan had no such feeling, but nine years later, when he took his own son (then eighteen and about to start college) to the movies one night, Delevan

would rise unexpectedly to his feet about thirty minutes into the feature and scream, "It's him! That's HIM! That's the guy in the fucking blue suit! The guy who was at Cle—"

Somebody would shout Down in front! but needn't have bothered; Delevan, seventy pounds overweight and a heavy smoker, would be struck by a fatal heart attack before the complainer even got to the second word. The man in the blue suit who approached their cruiser that day and told them about his stolen wallet didn't look like the star of the movie, but the dead delivery of words had been the same; so had been the somehow relentless yet graceful way he moved. The movie, of course, had been *The Terminator*.

8

The cops exchanged a glance. The man Blue-Suit was talking about wasn't Clements, but almost as good: "Fat Johnny" Holden, Clements' brother-in-law. But to have done something as totally dumb-ass as simply stealing a guy's wallet would be—

—would be right up that gink's alley, O'Mearah's mind finished, and he had to put a hand to his mouth to cover a momentary little grin.

"Maybe you better tell us exactly what happened," Dele-van said. "You can start with your name."

Again, the man's response struck O'Mearah as a little wrong, a little off-beat. In this city, where it sometimes seemed that seventy per cent of the population believed Go fuck yourself was American for Have a nice day, he would have expected the guy to say something like, Hey, that S.O.B. took my wallet! Are you going to get it back for me or are we going to stand out here playing Twenty Questions?

But there was the nicely cut suit, the manicured finger-nails. A guy maybe used to dealing with bureaucratic bullshit. In truth, George O'Mearah didn't care much. The thought of busting Fat Johnny Holden and using him as a lever on Arnold Clements made O'Mearah's mouth water. For one dizzy moment he even allowed himself to imagine using Holden to get Clements and Clements to get one of the really big guys—that wop Balazar, for instance, or maybe Ginelli. That wouldn't be too tacky. Not too tacky at all.

"My name is Jack Mort," the man said.

Delevan had taken a butt-warped pad from his back pocket. "Address?"

That slight pause. Like the machine, O'Mearah thought again. A moment of silence, then an almost audible click.

"409 Park Avenue South."

Delevan jotted it down.

"Social Security number?"

After another slight pause, Mort recited it.

"Want you to understand I gotta ask you these questions for identification purposes. If the guy did take your wallet, it's nice if I can say you told me certain stuff before I take it into my possession. You understand."

"Yes." Now there was the slightest hint of impatience in the man's voice. It made O'Mearah feel a little better about him somehow. "Just don't drag it out any more than you have to. Time passes, and—"

"Things have a way of happening, yeah, I dig."

"Things have a way of happening," the man in the blue suit agreed. "Yes."

"Do you have a photo in your wallet that's distinctive?"

A pause. Then: "A picture of my mother taken in front of the Empire State Building. On the back is written: 'It was a wonderful day and a wonderful view. Love, Mom.' "

Delevan jotted furiously, then snapped his notebook closed. "Okay. That should do it. Only other thing'll be to have you write your signature if we get the wallet back and compare it with the sigs on your driver's license, credit cards, stuff like that. Okay?"

Roland nodded, although part of him understood that, although he could draw on Jack Mort's memories and knowl-edge of this world as much as he needed, he hadn't a chance in hell of duplicating Mort's signature with Mort's consciousness absent, as it was now.

"Tell us what happened."

"I went in to buy shells for my brother. He has a .45 Winchester revolver. The man asked me if I had a Permit to Carry. I said of course. He asked to see it." Pause.

"I took out my wallet. I showed him. Only when I turned my wallet around to do that showing, he must have seen there were quite a few—" slight pause "—twenties in there. I am a tax accountant. I have a client named Dorfman who just won a small tax refund after an extended—" pause "—litigation. The sum was only eight hundred dollars, but this man, Dorf-man, is—" pause "—the biggest prick we handle." Pause. "Pardon my pun."

O'Mearah ran the man's last few words back through his head and suddenly got it. The biggest prick we handle. Not bad. He laughed. Thoughts of robots and machines that played tic-tac-toe went out of his mind. The guy was real enough, just upset and trying to hide it by being cool.

"Anyway, Dorfman wanted cash. He insisted on cash."

"You think Fat Johnny got a look at your client's dough,"

Delevan said. He and O'Mearah got out of the blue-and-white.

"Is that what you call the man in the that shop?"

"Oh, we call him worse than that on occasion," Delevan said. "What happened after you showed him your P.C., Mr. Mort?"

"He asked for a closer look. I gave him my wallet but he didn't look at the picture. He dropped it on the floor. I asked him what he did that for. He said that was a stupid question. Then I told him to give me back my wallet. I was mad."

"I bet you were." Although, looking at the man's dead face, Delevan thought you'd never guess this man could get mad.

"He laughed. I started to come around the counter and get it. That was when he pulled the gun."

They had been walking toward the shop. Now they stopped. They looked excited rather than fearful. "Gun?" O'Mearah asked, wanting to be sure he had heard right.

"It was under the counter, by the cash register," the man in the blue suit said.

Roland remembered the moment when he had almost junked his original plan and gone for the man's weapon. Now he told these gunslingers why he hadn't. He wanted to use them, not get them killed. "I think it was in a docker's clutch."

"A what?" O'Mearah asked.

"A longer pause this time. The man's forehead wrinkled. "I don't know exactly how to say it... a thing you put your gun into. No one can grab it but you

unless they know how to push—"

"A spring-clip!" Delevan said. "Holy shit!" Another exchange of glances between the partners. Neither wanted to be the first to tell this guy that Fat Johnny had probably harvested the cash from his wallet already, shucked his buns out the back door, and tossed it over the wall of the alley behind the building. . . but a gun in a spring-clip. . . that was different. Robbery was a possible, but all at once a concealed weapons charge looked like a sure thing. Maybe not as good, but a foot in the door.

"What then?" O'Mearah asked.

"Then he told me I didn't have a wallet. He said—" pause"—that I got my picket pocked—my pocket picked, I mean— on the street and I'd better remember it if I wanted to stay healthy. I remembered seeing a police car parked up the block and I thought you might still be there. So I left."

"Okay," Delevan said. "Me and my partner are going in first, and fast. Give us about a minute—a full minute—just in case there's some trouble. Then come in, but stand by the door. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Let's bust this motherfucker."

The two cops went in. Roland waited thirty seconds and then followed them.

9

"Fat Johnny" Holden was doing more than protesting. He was bellowing.

"Guy's crazy! Guy comes in here, doesn't even know what he wants, then, when he sees it in the Shooter's Bible, he don't know how many comes in a box, how much they cost, and what he says about me wantin' a closer look at his P.C. is the biggest pile of shit I ever heard, because he don't have no Permit to—" Fat Johnny broke off. "There he is! There's the creep! Right there! I see you, buddy! I see your face! Next time you see mine you're gonna be fuckin sorry! I guarantee you that! I fuckin guarantee—"

"You don't have this man's wallet?" O'Mearah asked.

"You know I don't have his wallet!"

"You mind if we take a look behind this display case?" Delevan countered. "Just to be sure?"

"Jesus-fuckin-jumped-up-Christ-on-a-pony! The case is glass! You see any wallets there?"

"No, not there ... I meant here," Delevan said, moving toward the register. His voice was a cat's purr. At this point a chrome-steel reinforcing strip almost two feet wide ran down the shelves of the case. Delevan looked back at the man in the blue suit, who nodded.

"I want you guys out of here right now," Fat Johnny said. He had lost some of his color. "You come back with a warrant, that's different. But for now, I want you the fuck out. Still a free fuckin country, you kn—hey! hey! HEY, QUIT THAT!" O'Mearah was peering over the counter.

"That's illegal!" Fat Johnny was howling. "That's fuckin illegal, the Constitution . . . my fuckin lawyer. . . you get back on your side right now or—"

"I just wanted a closer look at the merchandise," O'Mearah said mildly, "on account of the glass in your display case is so fucking dirty. That's why I looked over. Isn't it, Carl?"

"True shit, buddy," Delevan said solemnly.

"And look what I found."

Roland heard a click, and suddenly the gunslinger in the blue uniform was holding an extremely large gun in his hand.

Fat Johnny, who had finally realized he was the only person in the room who would tell a story that differed from the fairy tale just told by the cop who had taken his Mag, turned sullen.

"I got a permit," he said.

"To carry?" Delevan asked.

"Yeah."

"To carry concealed?"

"Yeah."

"This gun registered?" O'Mearah asked. "It is, isn't it?"

"Well ... I mighta forgot."

"Might be it's hot, and you forgot that, too."

"Fuck you. I'm calling my lawyer."

Fat Johnny started to turn away. Delevan grabbed him.

"Then there's the question of whether or not you got a permit to conceal a deadly weapon in a spring-clip device," he said in the same soft, purring voice.

"That's an interesting question, because so far as I know, the City of New York doesn't issue a permit like that."

The cops were looking at Fat Johnny; Fat Johnny was glaring back at them. So none of them noticed Roland turn the sign hanging in the door from OPEN to CLOSED.

"Maybe we could start to resolve this matter if we could find the gentleman's wallet," O'Mearah said. Satan himself could not have lied with such genial persuasiveness. "Maybe he just dropped it, you know."

"I told you! I don't know nothing about the guy's wallet! Guy's out of his mind!"

Roland bent down. "There it is," he remarked. "I can just see it. He's got his foot on it."

This was a lie, but Delevan, whose hand was still on Fat Johnny's shoulder, shoved the man back so rapidly that it was impossible to tell if the man's foot had been there or not.

It had to be now. Roland glided silently toward the counter as the two gunslingers bent to peer under the counter. Because they were standing side by side, this brought their heads close together. O'Mearah still had the gun the clerk had kept under the counter in his right hand.

"Goddam, it's there!" Delevan said excitedly. "I see it!"

Roland snapped a quick glance at the man they had called Fat Johnny, wanting to make sure he was not going to make a play. But he was only standing against the wall—pushing against it, actually, as if wishing he could push himself into it—with his hands hanging at his sides and his eyes great wounded O's. He looked like a man wondering how come his horoscope hadn't told him to beware this day. No problem there.

"Yeah!" O'Mearah replied gleefully. The two men peered under the counter, hands on uniformed knees. Now O'Mearah's left his knee and he reached out to snag the wallet. "I see it, t—"

Roland took one final step forward. He cupped Delevan's right cheek in one hand, O'Mearah's left cheek in the other, and all of a sudden a day Fat Johnny Holden

believed had to have hit rock bottom got a lot worse. The spook in the blue suit brought the cops' heads together hard enough to make a sound like rocks wrapped in felt colliding with each other.

The cops fell in a heap. The man in the gold-rimmed specs stood. He was pointing the .357 Mag at Fat Johnny. The muzzle looked big enough to hold a moon rocket. "We're not going to have any trouble, are we?" the spook asked in his dead voice.

"No sir," Fat Johnny said at once, "not a bit."

"Stand right there. If your ass loses contact with that wall, you are going to lose contact with life as you have always known it. You understand?"

"Yes sir," Fat Johnny said, "I sure do."

"Good."

Roland pushed the two cops apart. They were both still alive. That was good. No matter how slow and unobservant they might be, they were gunslingers, men who had tried to help a stranger in trouble. He had no urge to kill his own.

But he had done it before, hadn't he? Yes. Had not Alain himself, one of his sworn brothers, died under Roland's and Cuthbert's own smoking guns?

Without taking his eyes from the clerk, he felt under the counter with the toe of Jack Mort's Gucci loafer. He felt the wallet. He kicked it. It came spinning out from underneath the counter on the clerk's side. Fat Johnny jumped and shrieked like a goosey girl who spies a mouse. His ass actually did lose contact with the wall for a moment, but the gunslinger over-looked it. He had no intention of putting a bullet in this man. He would throw the gun at him and poleaxe him with it before firing a shot. A gun as absurdly big as this would probably bring half the neighborhood.

"Pick it up," the gunslinger said. "Slowly."

Fat Johnny reached down, and as he grasped the wallet, he farted loudly and screamed. With faint amusement the gunslinger realized he had mistaken the sound of his own fart for a gunshot and his time of dying had come.

When Fat Johnny stood up, he was blushing furiously. There was a large wet patch on the front of his pants.

"Put the purse on the counter. Wallet, I mean."

Fat Johnny did it.

"Now the shells. Winchester .45s. And I want to see your hands every second."

"I have to reach into my pocket. For my keys."

Roland nodded.

As Fat Johnny first unlocked and then slid open the case with the stacked cartons of bullets inside, Roland cogitated.

"Give me four boxes," he said at last. He could not imagine needing so many shells, but the temptation to have them was not to be denied.

Fat Johnny put the boxes on the counter. Roland slid one of them open, still hardly able to believe it wasn't a joke or a sham. But they were bullets, all right, clean, shining, un-marked, never fired, never reloaded. He held one up to the light for a moment, then put it back in the box.

"Now take out a pair of those wristbands."

"Wristbands—?"

The gunslinger consulted the Mortcyclopedia. "Handcuffs."

"Mister, I dunno what you want. The cash register's—"

"Do what I say. Now."

Christ, this ain't never gonna to end, Fat Johnny's mind moaned. He opened

another section of the counter and brought out a pair of cuffs.

"Key?" Roland asked.

Fat Johnny put the key to the cuffs on the counter. It made a small click. One of the unconscious cops made an abrupt snoring sound and Johnny uttered a wee screech.

"Turn around," the gunslinger said.

"You ain't gonna shoot me, are you? Say you ain't!"

"Ain't," Roland said tonelessly. "As long as you turn around right now. If you don't do that, I will."

Fat Johnny turned around, beginning to blubber. Of course the guy said he wasn't going to, but the smell of mob hit was getting too strong to ignore. He hadn't even been skim-ming that much. His blubbers became choked wails.

"Please, mister, for my mother's sake don't shoot me. My mother's old. She's blind. She's—"

"She's cursed with a yellowgut son," the gunslinger said dourly. "Wrists together."

Mewling, wet pants sticking to his crotch, Fat Johnny put them together. In a trice the steel bracelets were locked in place. He had no idea how the spook had gotten over or around the counter so quickly. Nor did he want to know.

"Stand there and look at the wall until I tell you it's all right to turn around. If you turn around before then, I'll kill you."

Hope lighted Fat Johnny's mind. Maybe the guy didn't mean to hit him after all. Maybe the guy wasn't crazy, just insane.

"I won't. Swear to God. Swear before all of His saints. Swear before all His angels. Swear before all His arch—"

"I swear if you don't shut up I'll put a slug through your neck," the spook said.

Fat Johnny shut up. It seemed to him that he stood facing the wall for an eternity. In truth, it was about twenty seconds.

The gunslinger knelt, put the clerk's gun on the floor, took a quick look to make sure the maggot was being good, then rolled the other two onto their backs. Both were good and out, but not dangerously hurt, Roland judged. They were both breathing regularly. A little blood trickled from the ear of the one called Delevan, but that was all.

He took another quick glance at the clerk, then unbuckled the gunslingers' gunbelts and stripped them off. Then he took off Mort's blue suitcoat and buckled the belts on himself. They were the wrong guns, but it still felt good to be packing iron again. Damned good. Better than he would have believed. Two guns. One for Eddie, and one for Odetta . . . when and if Odetta was ready for a gun. He put on Jack Mort's coat again, dropped two boxes of shells into the right pocket and two into the left. The coat, formerly impeccable, now bulged out of shape. He picked up the clerk's .357 Mag and put the shells in his pants pocket. Then he tossed the gun across the room. When it hit the floor Fat Johnny jumped, uttered another wee shriek, and squirted a little more warm water in his pants.

The gunslinger stood up and told Fat Johnny to turn around.

gold-rimmed glasses, his mouth fell open. For a moment he felt an overwhelming certainty that the man who had come in here had become a ghost when Fat Johnny's back was turned. It seemed to Fat Johnny that through the man he could see a figure much more real, one of those legendary gunfighters they used to make movies and TV shows about when he was a kid: Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Butch Cassidy, one of those guys.

Then his vision cleared and he realized what the crazy nut had done: taken the cops' guns and strapped them around his waist. With the suit and tie the effect should have been ludi-crous, but somehow it wasn't.

"The key to the wristbands is on the counter. When the possemen wake up they'll free you."

He took the wallet, opened it, and, incredibly, laid four twenty dollar bills on the glass before stuffing the wallet back into his pocket.

"For the ammunition," Roland said. "I've taken the bullets from your own gun. I intend to throw them away when I leave your store. I think that, with an unloaded gun and no wallet, they may find it difficult to charge you with a crime."

Fat Johnny gulped. For one of the few times in his life he was speechless.

"Now where is the nearest—" Pause. "—nearest drug-store?"

Fat Johnny suddenly understood—or thought he under-stood—everything. The guy was a junkball, of course. That was the answer. No wonder he was so weird. Probably hopped up to the eyeballs.

"There's one around the corner. Half a block down Forty-Ninth."

"If you're lying, I'll come back and put a bullet in your brain."

"I'm not lying!" Fat Johnny cried. "I swear before God the Father! I swear before all the Saints! I swear on my mother's—"

But then the door was swinging shut. Fat Johnny stood for a moment in utter silence; unable to believe the nut was gone.

Then he walked as rapidly as he could around the counter and to the door. He turned his back to it and fumbled around until he was able to grasp and turn the lock. He fumbled some more until he had managed to shoot the bolt as well. Only then did he allow himself to slide slowly into a sitting position, gasping and moaning and swearing to God and all His saints and angels that he would go to St. Anthony's this very afternoon, as soon as one of those pigs woke up and let him out of these cuffs, as a matter of fact. He was going to make confession, do an act of contrition, and take com-munion.

Fat Johnny Holden wanted to get right with God.

This had just been too fucking close.

11

The setting sun became an arc over the Western Sea. It narrowed to a single bright line which seared Eddie's eyes. Looking at such a light for long could put a permanent burn on your retinas. This was just one of the many interesting facts you learned in school, facts that helped you get a fulfilling job like part-time bartender and an interesting hobby like the full-time search for street-skag and the bucks with which to buy it. Eddie didn't stop looking. He didn't think it was going to matter much longer if he got eye-burned or not. He didn't beg the witch-woman behind him. First, it wouldn't help. Second, begging would degrade him. He had lived a degrading life; he discovered that he



had no wish to degrade himself further in the last few minutes of it. Minutes were all he had left now. That's all there would be before that bright line disappeared and the time of the lobsterstrosities came.

He had ceased hoping that a miraculous change would bring Odetta back at the last moment, just as he ceased hoping that Detta would recognize that his death would almost cer-tainly strand her in this world forever. He had believed until fifteen minutes ago that she was bluffing; now he knew better.

Well, it'll be better than strangling an inch at a time, he thought, but after seeing the loathsome lobster-things night after night, he really didn't believe that was true. He hoped he would be able to die without screaming. He didn't think this would be possible, but he intended to try.

"They be comin fo you, honky!" Detta screeched. "Be comin any minute now! Goan be the best dinner those daddies evah had!"

It wasn't just a bluff, Odetta wasn't coming back. . . and the gunslinger wasn't, either. This last hurt the most, some-how. He had been sure he and the gunslinger had become— well, partners if not brothers—during their trek up the beach, and Roland would at least make an effort to stand by him.

But Roland wasn't coming.

Maybe it isn't that he doesn't want to come. Maybe he can't come. Maybe he's dead, killed by a security guard in a drugstore—shit, that'd be a laugh, the world's last gunslinger killed by a Rent-A-Cop—or maybe run over by a taxi. Maybe he's dead and the door's gone. Maybe that's why she's not running a bluff. Maybe there's no bluff to run.

"Goan be any minute now!" Delta screamed, and then Eddie didn't have to worry about his retinas anymore, because that last bright slice of light disappeared, leaving only afterglow.

He stared at the waves, the bright afterimage slowly fad-ing from his eyes, and waited for the first of the lobsterstrosities to come rolling and tumbling out of the waves.

12

Eddie tried to turn his head to avoid the first one, but he was too slow. It ripped off a swatch of his face with one claw, splattering his left eye to jelly and revealing the bright gleam of bone in the twilight as it asked its questions and the Really Bad Woman laughed . . .

Stop it, Roland commanded himself. Thinking such thoughts is worse than helpless; it is a distraction. And it need not be. There may still be time.

And there still was—then. As Roland strode down Forty-Ninth street in Jack Mort's body, arms swinging, bullshooter's eyes fixed firmly upon the sign which read DRUGS, oblivious to the stares he was getting and the way people swerved to avoid him, the sun was still up in Roland's world. Its lower rim would not touch the place where sea met sky for another fifteen minutes or so. If Eddie's time of agony was to come, it was still ahead.

The gunslinger did not know this for a fact, however; he only knew it was later over there than here and while the sun should still be up over there, the assumption that time in this world and his own ran at the same speed might be a deadly one . . . especially for Eddie, who would die the death of unimag-inable horror that his mind nevertheless kept trying to imagine.

The urge to look back, to see, was almost insurmounta-ble. Yet he dared not.

Must not.

The voice of Cort interrupted the run of his thoughts sternly: Control the things you can control, maggot. Let every-thing else take a flying fuck at you, and if you must go down, go down with your guns blazing.

Yes.

But it was hard.

Very hard, sometimes.

He would have seen and understood why people were staring at him and then veering away if he had been a little less savagely fixed on finishing his work in this world as soon as he could and getting the hell out, but it would have changed nothing. He strode so rapidly toward the blue sign where, according to the Mortyclopedia, he could get the Ke-flex stuff his body needed, that Mort's suitcoat flapped out behind him in spite of the heavy lead weighting in each pocket. The gunbelts buckled across his hips were clearly revealed. He wore them not as their owners had, straight and neat, but as he wore his own, criss-cross, low-hung on his hips.

To the shoppers, hoppers, and hawkers on Forty-Ninth, he looked much as he had looked to Fat Johnny: like a desperado.

Roland reached Katz's Drug Store and went in.

13

The gunslinger had known magicians, enchanters, and alchemists in his time. Some had been clever charlatans, some stupid fakes in whom only people more stupid than they were themselves could believe (but there had never been a shortage of fools in the world, so even the stupid fakes survived; in fact most actually thrived), and a small few actually able to do those black things of which men whisper—these few could call demons and the dead, could kill with a curse or heal with strange potions. One of these men had been a creature the gunslinger believed to be a demon himself, a creature that pretended to be a man and called itself Flagg. He had seen him only briefly, and that had been near the end, as chaos and the final crash approached his land. Hot on his heels had come two young men who looked desperate and yet grim, men named Dennis and Thomas. These three had crossed only a tiny part of what had been a confused and confusing time in the gunslinger's life, but he would never forget seeing Flagg change a man who had irritated him into a howling dog. He remembered that well enough. Then there had been the man in black.

And there had been Marten.

Marten who had seduced his mother while his father was away, Marten who had tried to author Roland's death but had instead authored his early manhood, Marten who, he suspected, he might meet again before he reached the Tower . . . or at it.

This is only to say that his experience of magic and magicians had led him to expect something quite different than what he did find in Katz's Drug Store. He had anticipated a dim, candle-lit room full of bitter fumes, jars of unknown powders and liquids and philters, many covered with a thick layer of dust or spun about with a century's cobwebs. He had expected a man in a cowl, a man who might be dangerous. He saw people moving about inside through the transparent plate-glass windows, as casually as they would in any shop, and believed they must be an illusion.

They weren't.

So for a moment the gunslinger merely stood inside the door, first amazed, then ironically amused. Here he was in a world which struck him dumb with fresh wonders seemingly at every step, a world where carriages flew through the air and paper seemed as cheap as sand. And the newest wonder was simply that for these people, wonder had run out: here, in a place of miracles, he saw only dull faces and plodding bodies.

There were thousands of bottles, there were potions, there were philters, but the Mortcyclopedia identified most as quack remedies. Here was a salve that was supposed to restore fallen hair but would not; there a cream which promised to erase unsightly spots on the hands and arms but lied. Here were cures for things that needed no curing: things to make your bowels run or stop them up, to make your teeth white and your hair black, things to make your breath smell better as if you could not do that by chewing alder-bark. No magic here; only trivialities—although there was astin, and a few other remedies which sounded as if they might be useful. But for the most part, Roland was appalled by the place. In a place that promised alchemy but dealt more in perfume than potion, was it any wonder that wonder had run out?

But when he consulted the Mortcyclopedia again, he discovered that the truth of this place was not just in the things he was looking at. The potions that really worked were kept safely out of sight. One could only obtain these if you had a sorcerer's fiat. In this world, such sorcerers were called DOCKTORS, and they wrote their magic formulae on sheets of paper which the Mortcyclopedia called REXES. The gunslinger didn't know the word. He supposed he could have consulted further on the matter, but didn't bother. He knew what he needed, and a quick look into the Mortcyclopedia told him where in the store he could get it. He strode down one of the aisles toward a high counter with the words PRESCRIPTIONS FILLED over it.

14

The Katz who had opened Katz's Pharmacy and Soda Fountain (Sundries and Notions for Misses and Misterys) on 49th Street in 1927 was long in his grave, and his only son looked ready for his own. Although he was only forty-six, he looked twenty years older. He was balding, yellow-skinned, and frail. He knew people said he looked like death on horse-back, but none of them understood why.

Take this crotch on the phone now. Mrs. Rathbun. Rant-ing that she would sue him if he didn't fill her goddamned Valium prescription and right now, RIGHT THIS VERY INSTANT.

What do you think, lady, I'm gonna pour a stream of blue bombers through the phone? If he did, she would at least do him a favor and shut up. She would just tip the receiver up over her mouth and open wide.

The thought raised a ghostly grin which revealed his sallow dentures.

"You don't understand, Mrs. Rathbun," he interrupted after he had listened to a minute—a full minute, timed it with the sweep second-hand of his watch—of her raving. He would like, just once, to be able to say: Stop shouting at me, you stupid crotch! Shout at your DOCTOR! He's the one who hooked you on that shit! Right. Damn quacks gave it out like it was bubblegum, and when they decided to cut off the supply, who got hit with the shit? The sawbones? Oh, no! He did!

"What do you mean, I don't understand?" The voice in his ear was like an angry

wasp buzzing in a jar. "I understand I do a lot of business at your tacky drugstore, I understand I've been a loyal customer all these years, I understand—"

"You'll have to speak to—" He glanced at the crotch's Rolodex card through his half-glasses again. "—Dr. Brumhall, Mrs. Rathbun. Your prescription has expired. It's a Fed-eral crime to dispense Valium without a prescription." And it ought to be one to prescribe it in the first place . . . unless you're going to give the patient you're prescribing it for your unlisted number with it, that is, he thought.

"It was an oversight!" the woman screamed. Now there was a raw edge of panic in her voice. Eddie would have recognized that tone at once: it was the call of the wild Junk-Bird.

"Then call him and ask him to rectify it," Katz said. "He has my number." Yes. They all had his number. That was precisely the trouble. He looked like a dying man at forty-six because of the fershlugginer doctors.

And all I have to do to guarantee that the last thin edge of prof it I am somehow holding onto in this place will melt away is tell a few of these junkie bitches to go fuck themselves. That's all.

"I CAN'T CALL HIM!" she screamed. Her voice drilled painfully into his ear. "HIM AND HIS FAG BOY-FRIEND ARE ON VACATION SOMEPLACE AND NO ONE WILL TELL ME WHERE!"

Katz felt acid seeping into his stomach. He had two ulcers, one healed, the other currently bleeding, and women like this bitch were the reason why. He closed his eyes. Thus he did not see his assistant stare at the man in the blue suit and the gold-rimmed glasses approaching the prescription counter, nor did he see Ralph, the fat old security guard (Katz paid the man a pittance but still bitterly resented the expense; his father had never needed a security guard, but his father, God rot him, had lived in a time when New York had been a city instead of a toilet-bowl) suddenly come out of his usual dim daze and reach for the gun on his hip. He heard a woman scream, but thought it was because she had just discovered all the Revlon was on sale, he'd been forced to put the Revlon on sale because that putz Dollentz up the street was undercutting him.

He was thinking of nothing but Dollentz and this bitch on the phone as the gunslinger approached like fated doom, thinking of how wonderful the two of them would look naked save for a coating of honey and staked out over anthills in the burning desert sun. HIS and HERS anthills, wonderful. He was thinking this was the worst it could get, the absolute worst. His father had been so determined that his only son follow in his footsteps that he had refused to pay for anything but a degree in pharmacology, and so he had followed in his father's footsteps, and God rot his father, for this was surely the lowest moment in a life that had been full of low moments, a life which had made him old before his time.

This was the absolute nadir.

Or so he thought with his eyes closed.

"If you come by, Mrs. Rathbun, I could give you a dozen five milligram Valium. Would that be all right?"

"The man sees reason! Thank God, the man sees reason!" And she hung up. Just like that. Not a word of thanks. But when she saw the walking rectum that called itself a doctor again, she would just about fall down and polish the tips of his Gucci loafers with her nose, she would give him a blowjob, she would—

"Mr. Katz," his assistant said in a voice that sounded strangely winded. "I think we have a prob—"

There was another scream. It was followed by the crash of a gun, startling him so badly he thought for a moment his heart was simply going to utter one monstrous clap in his chest and then stop forever.

He opened his eyes and stared into the eyes of the gunslinger. Katz dropped his gaze and saw the pistol in the man's fist. He looked left and saw Ralph the guard nursing one hand and staring at the thief with eyes that seemed to be bugging out of his face. Ralph's own gun, the .38 which he had toted dutifully through eighteen years as a police officer (and which he had only fired from the line of the 23rd Precinct's basement target range; he said he had drawn it twice in the line of duty . . . but who knew?), was now a wreck in the corner.

"I want Keflex," the man with the bullshooter eyes said expressionlessly. "I want a lot. Now. And never mind the REX."

For a moment Katz could only look at him, his mouth open, his heart struggling in his chest, his stomach a sickly boiling pot of acid.

Had he thought he had hit rock bottom?

Had he really?

15

"You don't understand," Katz managed at last. His voice sounded strange to himself, and there was really nothing very odd about that, since his mouth felt like a flannel shirt and his tongue like a strip of cotton batting. "There is no cocaine here. It is not a drug which is dispensed under any cir—"

"I did not say cocaine," the man in the blue suit and the gold-rimmed glasses said. "I said Keflex."

That's what I thought you said, Katz almost told this crazy momser, and then decided that might provoke him. He had heard of drug stores getting held up for speed, for Bennies, for half a dozen other things (including Mrs. Rathbun's pre-cious Valium), but he thought this might be the first penicil-lin robbery in history.

The voice of his father (God rot the old bastard) told him to stop dithering and gawping and do something.

But he could think of nothing to do.

The man with the gun supplied him with something.

"Move," the man with the gun said. "I'm in a hurry."

"H-How much do you want?" Katz asked. His eyes flicked momentarily over the robber's shoulder, and he saw something he could hardly believe. Not in this city. But it looked like it was happening, anyway. Good luck? Katz actu-ally has some good luck? That you could put in The Guinness Book of World Records!

"I don't know," the man with the gun said. "As much as you can put in a bag. A big bag." And with no warning at all, he whirled and the gun in his fist crashed again. A man bellowed. Plate glass blew onto the sidewalk and the street in a sparkle of shards and splinters. Several passing pedestrians were cut, but none seriously. Inside Katz's drugstore, women (and not a few men) screamed. The burglar alarm began its own hoarse bellow. The customers panicked and stampeded toward and out the door. The man with the gun turned back to Katz and his expression had not changed at all: his face wore the same look of frightening (but not inexhaustable) patience that it had worn from the first. "Do as I say

rapidly. I'm in a hurry."

Katz gulped.

"Yes, sir," he said.

16

The gunslinger had seen and admired the curved mirror in the upper left corner of the shop while he was still halfway to the counter behind which they kept the powerful potions. The creation of such a curved mirror was beyond the ability of any craftsman in his own world as things were now, although there had been a time when such things—and many of the others he saw in Eddie and Odetta's world—might have been made. He had seen the remains of some in the tunnel under the mountains, and he had seen them in other places as well. . . . relics as ancient and mysterious as the Druid stones that some-times stood in the places where demons came.

He also understood the mirror's purpose.

He had been a bit late seeing the guard's move—he was still discovering how disastrously the lenses Mort wore over his eyes restricted his peripheral vision—but he'd still time to turn and shoot the gun out of the guard's hand. It was a shot Roland thought as nothing more than routine, although he'd needed to hurry a little. The guard, however, had a different opinion. Ralph Lennox would swear to the end of his days that the guy had made an impossible shot. . . . except, maybe, on those old kiddie Western shows like Annie Oakley.

Thanks to the mirror, which had obviously been placed where it was to detect thieves, Roland was quicker dealing with the other one.

He had seen the alchemist's eyes flick up and over his shoulder for a moment, and the gunslinger's own eyes had immediately gone to the mirror. In it he saw a man in a leather jacket moving up the center aisle behind him. There was a long knife in his hand and, no doubt, visions of glory in his head.

The gunslinger turned and fired a single shot, dropping the gun to his hip, aware that he might miss with the first shot because of his unfamiliarity with this weapon, but unwilling to injure any of the customers standing frozen behind the would-be hero. Better to have to shoot twice from the hip, firing slugs that would do the job while travelling on an upward angle that would protect the bystanders than to per-haps kill some lady whose only crime had been picking the wrong day to shop for perfume.

The gun had been well cared for. Its aim was true. Remembering the podgy, underexercised looks of the gunslingers he had taken these weapons from, it seemed that they cared better for the weapons they wore than for the weapons they were. It seemed a strange way to behave, but of course this was a strange world and Roland could not judge; had no time to judge, come to that.

The shot was a good one, chopping through the man's knife at the base of the blade, leaving him holding nothing but the hilt.

Roland stared evenly at the man in the leather coat, and something in his gaze must have made the would-be hero remember a pressing appointment elsewhere, for he whirled, dropped the remains of the knife, and joined the general exodus.

Roland turned back and gave the alchemist his orders. Any more fucking around and blood would flow. When the alchemist turned away, Roland tapped his bony shoulder blade with the barrel of the pistol. The man made a strangled "Yeek!" sound and turned back at once.

"Not you. You stay here. Let your 'prentice do it."

"W-Who?"

"Him." The gunslinger gestured impatiently at the aide.

"What should I do, Mr. Katz?" The remains of the aide's teenage acne stood out brilliantly on his white face.

"Do what he says, you putz! Fill the order! Keflex!"

The aide went to one of the shelves behind the counter and picked up a bottle.

"Turn it so I may see the words writ upon it," the gunslinger said.

The aide did. Roland couldn't read it; too many letters were not of his alphabet. He consulted the Mortcyclopedia. Keflex, it confirmed, and Roland realized even checking had been a stupid waste of time. He knew he couldn't read every-thing in this world, but these men didn't.

"How many pills in that bottle?"

"Well, they're capsules, actually," the aide said nervously. "If it's a cillin drug in pill form you're interested in—"

"Never mind all that. How many doses?"

"Oh. Uh—" The flustered aide looked at the bottle and almost dropped it. "Two hundred."

Roland felt much as he had when he discovered how much ammunition could be purchased in this world for a trivial sum. There had been nine sample bottles of Keflex in the secret compartment of Enrico Balazar's medicine cabinet, thirty-six doses in all, and he had felt well again. If he couldn't kill the infection with two hundred doses, it couldn't be killed.

"Give it to me," the man in the blue suit said.

The aide handed it over.

The gunslinger pushed back the sleeve of his jacket, revealing Jack Mort's Rolex. "I have no money, but this may serve as adequate compensation. I hope so, anyway."

He turned, nodded toward the guard, who was still sitting on the floor by his overturned stool and staring at the gunslinger with wide eyes, and then walked out.

Simple as that.

For five seconds there was no sound in the drugstore but the bray of the alarm, which was loud enough to blank out even the babble of the people on the street.

"God in heaven, Mr. Katz, what do we do now?" the aide whispered.

Katz picked up the watch and hefted it.

Gold. Solid gold.

He couldn't believe it.

He had to believe it.

Some madman walked in off the street, shot a gun out of his guard's hand and a knife out of another's, all in order to obtain the most unlikely drug he could think of.

Keflex.

Maybe sixty dollars' worth of Keflex.

For which he had paid with a \$6500 Rolex watch.

"Do?" Katz asked. "Do? The first thing you do is put that wristwatch under the counter. You never saw it." He looked at Ralph. "Neither did you."

"No sir," Ralph agreed immediately. "As long as I get my share when you sell it, I never saw that watch at all."

"They'll shoot him like a dog in the street," Katz said with unmistakable

satisfaction.

"Keflex! And the guy didn't even seem to have the sniffles!" the aide said wonderingly.

## CHAPTER 4 THE DRAWING

1

As the sun's bottom arc first touched the Western Sea in Roland's world, striking bright golden fire across the water to where Eddie lay trussed like a turkey, Officers O'Mearah and Delevan were coming groggily back to consciousness in the world from which Eddie had been taken.

"Let me out of these cuffs, would ya?" Fat Johnny asked in a humble voice.

"Where is he?" O'Mearah asked thickly, and groped for his holster. Gone.

Holster, belt, bullets, gun. Gun.

Oh, shit.

He began thinking of the questions that might be asked by the shits in the Department of Internal Affairs, guys who had learned all they knew about the streets from Jack Webb on Dragnet, and the monetary value of his lost gun suddenly became about as important to him as the population of Ireland or the principal mineral deposits of Peru. He looked at Carl and saw Carl had also been stripped of his weapon.

Oh dear Jesus, bring on the clowns, O'Mearah thought miserably, and when Fat Johnny asked again if O'Mearah would use the key on the counter to unlock the handcuffs, O'Mearah said, "I ought to. . ." He paused, because he'd been about to say I ought to shoot you in the guts instead, but he couldn't very well shoot Fat Johnny, could he? The guns here were chained down, and the geek in the gold-rimmed glasses, the geek who had seemed so much like a solid citizen, had taken his and Carl's as easily as O'Mearah himself might take a popgun from a kid.

Instead of finishing, he got the key and unlocked the cuffs. He spotted the .357 Magnum which Roland had kicked into the corner and picked it up. It wouldn't fit in his holster, so he stuffed it in his belt.

"Hey, that's mine!" Fat Johnny bleated.

"Yeah? You want it back?" O'Mearah had to speak slowly. His head really ached.

At that moment all he wanted to do was find Mr. Gold-Rimmed Specs and nail him to a handy wall. With dull nails. "I hear they like fat guys like you up in Attica, Johnny. They got a saying: 'The bigger the cushion, the better the pushin.' You sure you want it back?"

Fat Johnny turned away without a word, but not before O'Mearah had seen the tears welling in his eyes and the wet patch on his pants. He felt no pity.

"Where is he?" Carl Delevan asked in a furry, buzzing voice.

"He left," Fat Johnny said dully. "That's all I know. He left. I thought he was gonna kill me."

Delevan was getting slowly to his feet. He felt tacky wet-ness on the side of his face and looked at his fingers. Blood. Fuck. He groped for his gun and kept



groping, groping and hoping, long after his fingers had assured him his gun and holster were gone. O'Mearah merely had a headache; Delevan felt as if someone had used the inside of his head as a nuclear weapons testing site.

"Guy took my gun," he said to O'Mearah. His voice was so slurry the words were almost impossible to make out.

"Join the club."

"He still here?" Delevan took a step toward O'Mearah, tilted to the left as if he were on the deck of a ship in a heavy sea, and then managed to right himself.

"No."

"How long?" Delevan looked at Fat Johnny, who didn't answer, perhaps because Fat Johnny, whose back was turned, thought Delevan was still talking to his partner. Delevan, not a man noted for even temper and restrained behavior under the best of circumstances, roared at the man, even though it made his head feel like it was going to crack into a thousand pieces: "I asked you a question, you fat shit! How long has that motherfucker been gone?"

"Five minutes, maybe," Fat Johnny said dully. "Took his shells and your guns." He paused. "Paid for the shells. I couldn't believe it."

Five minutes, Delevan thought. The guy had come in a cab. Sitting in their cruiser and drinking coffee, they had seen him get out of it. It was getting close to rush-hour. Cabs were hard to get at this time of day. Maybe—

"Come on," he said to George O'Mearah. "We still got a chance to collar him. We'll want a gun from this slut here—"

O'Mearah displayed the Magnum. At first Delevan saw two of them, then the image slowly came together.

"Good." Delevan was coming around, not all at once but getting there, like a prizefighter who has taken a damned hard one on the chin. "You keep it. I'll use the shotgun under the dash." He started for the door, and this time he did more than reel; he staggered and had to claw the wall to keep his feet.

"You gonna be all right?" O'Mearah asked.

"If we catch him," Delevan said.

They left. Fat Johnny was not as glad about their departure as he had been about that of the spook in the blue suit, but almost. Almost.

2

Delevan and O'Mearah didn't even have to discuss which direction the perp might have taken when he left the gun-shop. All they had to do was listen to the radio dispatcher.

"Code 19," she said over and over again. Robbery in progress, shots fired. "Code 19, Code 19. Location is 395 West 49th, Katz's Drugs, perpetrator tall, sandy-haired, blue suit—"

Shots fired, Delevan thought, his head aching worse than ever. I wonder if they were fired with George's gun or mine? Or both? If that shitbag killed someone, we're fucked. Unless we get him.

"Blast off," he said curtly to O'Mearah, who didn't need to be told twice. He understood the situation as well as Delevan did. He flipped on the lights and the siren and screamed out into traffic. It was knotting up already, rush-hour starting, and so O'Mearah ran the cruiser with two wheels in the gutter and two on the sidewalk, scattering pedestrians like quail. He clipped the rear fender of a produce truck sliding onto Forty-Ninth. Ahead he could see twinkling glass

on the sidewalk. They could both hear the strident bray of the alarm. Pedestrians were sheltering in doorways and behind piles of garbage, but residents of the overhead apartments were staring out eagerly, as if this was a particularly good TV show, or a movie you didn't have to pay to see. The block was devoid of automobile traffic; cabs and commuters alike had scattered.

"I just hope he's still there," Delevan said, and used a key to unlock the short steel bars across the stock and barrel of the pump shotgun under the dashboard. He pulled it out of its clips. "I just hope that rotten-crotch son of a bitch is still, there."

What neither understood was that, when you were dealing with the gunslinger, it was usually better to leave bad enough alone.

3

When Roland stepped out of Katz's Drugs, the big bottle of Keflex had joined the cartons of ammo in Jack Mort's coat pockets. He had Carl Delevan's service .38 in his right hand. It felt so damned good to hold a gun in a whole right hand. He heard the siren and saw the car roaring down the street. Then, he thought. He began to raise the gun and then remembered: they were gunslingers. Gunslingers doing their duty. He turned and went back into the alchemist's shop.

"Hold it, motherfucker!" Delevan screamed. Roland's eyes flew to the convex mirror in time to see one of the gunslingers—the one whose ear had bled—leaning out of the window with a scatter-rifle. As his partner pulled their carriage to a screaming halt that made its rubber wheels smoke on the pavement he jacked a shell into its chamber.

Roland hit the floor.

4

Katz didn't need any mirror to see what was about to happen. First the crazy man, now the crazy cops. Oy vay.

"Drop!" he screamed to his assistant and to Ralph, the security guard, and then fell to his knees behind the counter without waiting to see if they were doing the same or not.

Then, a split-second before Delevan triggered the shot-gun, his assistant dropped on top of him like an eager tackle sacking the quarterback in a football game, driving Katz's head against the floor and breaking his jaw in two places. Through the sudden pain which went roaring through his head, he heard the shotgun's blast, heard the remaining glass in the windows shatter—along with bottles of aftershave, cologne, perfume, mouthwash, cough syrup, God knew what else. A thousand conflicting smells rose, creating one hell-stench, and before he passed out, Katz again called upon God to rot his father for chaining this curse of a drug store to his ankle in the first place.

5

Roland saw bottles and boxes fly back in a hurricane of shot. A glass case containing time-pieces disintegrated. Most of the watches inside also disintegrated. The pieces flew back-wards in a sparkling cloud.

They can't know if there are still innocent people in here or not, he thought. They can't know and yet they used a scatter-rifle just the same! It was unforgivable. He felt anger and suppressed it. They were gunslingers. Better to believe their brains had been addled by the head-knocking they'd taken than to believe they'd done such a thing knowingly, without a care for whom they might hurt or kill. They would expect him to either run or shoot. Instead, he crept forward, keeping low. He lacerated both hands and knees on shards of broken glass. The pain brought Jack Mort back to consciousness. He was glad Mort was back. He would need him. As for Mort's hands and knees, he didn't care. He could stand the pain easily, and the wounds were being inflicted on the body of a monster who deserved no better. He reached the area just under what remained of the plate-glass window. He was to the right of the door. He crouched there, body coiled. He bolstered the gun which had been in his right hand. He would not need it.

6

"What are you doing, Carl?" O'Mearah screamed. In his head he suddenly saw a Daily News headline: COP KILLS 4 IN WEST SIDE DRUG STORE SNAFU. Delevan ignored him and pumped a fresh shell into the shotgun. "Let's go get this shit."

7

It happened exactly as the gunslinger had hoped it would. Furious at being effortlessly fooled and disarmed by a man who probably looked to them no more dangerous than any of the other lambs on the streets of this seemingly endless city, still groggy from the head-knocking, they rushed in with the idiot who had fired the scatter-rifle in the lead. They ran slightly bent-over, like soldiers charging an enemy position, but that was the only concession they made to the idea that their adversary might still be inside. In their minds, he was already out the back and fleeing down an alley. So they came crunching over the sidewalk glass, and when the gunslinger with the scatter-rifle pulled open the glassless door and charged in, the gunslinger rose, his hands laced together in a single fist, and brought it down on the nape of Officer Carl Delevan's neck. While testifying before the investigating committee, Delevan would claim he remembered nothing at all after kneeling down in Clements' and seeing the perp's wallet under the counter. The committee members thought such amnesia was, under the circumstances, pretty damned convenient, and Delevan was lucky to get off with a sixty-day suspension without pay. Roland, however, would have believed, and, under different circumstances (if the fool hadn't discharged a scatter-rifle into a store which might have been full of innocent people, for instance), even sympathized. When you got your skull busted twice in half an hour, a few scrambled brains were to be expected. As Delevan went down, suddenly as boneless as a sack of oats, Roland took the scatter-rifle from his relaxing hands.

"Hold it!" O'Mearah screamed, his voice a mixture of anger and dismay. He was starting to raise Fat Johnny's Mag-num, but it was as Roland had suspected: the gunslingers of this world were pitifully slow. He could have shot O'Mearah three times, but there was no need. He simply swung the scatter-gun in a strong, climbing arc. There was a flat smack as the stock connected with O'Mearah's left cheek, the sound of a baseball bat connecting with a real steamer of a pitch. All at once O'Mearah's entire face from the cheek on down moved two inches to the right. It would take three operations and four steel pegs to put him together again. He stood there for a moment, unbelieving, and then his eyes rolled up the whites. His knees unhinged and he collapsed. Roland stood in the doorway, oblivious to the approaching sirens. He broke the scatter-rifle, then worked the pump action, ejecting all the fat red cartridges onto Delevan's body. That done, he dropped the gun itself onto Delevan. "You're a dangerous fool who should be sent west," he told the unconscious man. "You have forgotten the face of your father." He stepped over the body and walked to the gunslingers' carriage, which was still idling. He climbed in the door on the far side and slid behind the driving wheel.

8

Can you drive this carriage? he asked the screaming, gibbering thing that was Jack Mort.

He got no coherent answer; Mort just went on screaming. The gunslinger recognized this as hysteria, but one which was not entirely genuine. Jack Mort was having hysterics on purpose, as a way of avoiding any conversation with this weird kidnapper.

Listen, the gunslinger told him. I only have time to say this—and everything else—once. My time has grown very short. If you don't answer my question, I am going to put your right thumb into your right eye. I'll jam it in as far as it will go, and then I'll pull your eyeball right out of your head and wipe it on the seat of this carriage like a booger. I can get along with one eye just fine. And, after all, it isn't as if it were mine.

He could no more have lied to Mort than Mort could have lied to him; the nature of their relationship was cold and reluctant on both their parts, yet it was much more intimate than the most passionate act of sexual intercourse would have been. This was, after all, not a joining of bodies but the ultimate meeting of minds.

He meant exactly what he said.

And Mort knew it.

The hysterics stopped abruptly. I can drive it, Mort said. It was the first sensible communication Roland had gotten from Mort since he had arrived inside the man's head.

Then do it.

Where do you want me to go?

Do you know a place called "The Village"?

Yes.

Go there.

Where in the Village?

For now, just drive.

We'll be able to go faster if I use the siren.

Fine. Turn it on. Those flashing lights, too.

For the first time since he had seized control of him, Roland pulled back a little and allowed Mort to take over. When Mort's head turned to inspect the dashboard of Delevan's and O'Mearah's blue-and-white, Roland watched it turn but did not initiate the action. But if he had been a physical being instead of only his own disembodied ka, he would have been standing on the balls of his feet, ready to leap forward and take control again at the slightest sign of mutiny.

There was none, though. This man had killed and maimed God knew how many innocent people, but he had no intention of losing one of his own precious eyes. He flicked switches, pulled a lever, and suddenly they were in motion. The siren whined and the gunslinger saw red pulses of light kicking off the front of the carriage.

Drive fast, the gunslinger commanded grimly.

9

In spite of lights and siren and Jack Mort beating steadily on the horn, it took them twenty minutes to reach Greenwich Village in rush-hour traffic. In the gunslinger's world Eddie Dean's hopes were crumbling like dykes in a downpour. Soon they would collapse altogether.

The sea had eaten half the sun.

Well, Jack Mort said, we're here. He was telling the truth (there was no way he could lie) although to Roland everything here looked just as it had everywhere else: a choke of buildings, people, and carriages. The carriages choked not only the streets but the air itself—with their endless clamor and their noxious fumes. It came, he supposed, from whatever fuel it was they burned. It was a wonder these people could live at all, or the women give birth to children that were not monsters, like the Slow Mutants under the mountains.

Now where do we go? Mort was asking.

This would be the hard part. The gunslinger got ready— as ready as he could, at any rate.

Turn off the siren and the lights. Stop by the sidewalk.

Mort pulled the cruiser up beside a fire hydrant.

There are underground railways in this city, the gun-slinger said. I want you to take me to a station where these trains stop to let passengers on and off.

Which one? Mort asked. The thought was tinged with the mental color of panic.

Mort could hide nothing from Roland, and Roland nothing from Mort—not, at least, for very long.

Some years ago—I don't know how many—you pushed a young woman in front of a train in one of those underground stations. That's the one I want you to take me to.

There ensued a short, violent struggle. The gunslinger won, but it was a surprisingly hard go. In his way, Jack Mort was as divided as Odetta. He was not a schizophrenic as she was; he knew well enough what he did from time to time. But he kept his secret self—the part of him that was The Pusher— as carefully locked away as an embezzler might lock away his secret skim.

Take me there, you bastard, the gunslinger repeated. He slowly raised the thumb toward Mort's right eye again. It was less than half an inch away and still moving when he gave in.

Mort's right hand moved the lever by the wheel again and they rolled toward the Christopher Street station where that fabled A-train had cut off the legs of a woman named Odetta Holmes some three years before.

10

"Well looky there," foot patrolman Andrew Staunton said to his partner, Norris Weaver, as Delevan's and O'Mearah's blue-and-white came to a stop halfway down the block. There were no parking spaces, and the driver made no effort to find one. He simply double-parked and let the clog of traffic behind him inch its laborious way through the loophole remaining, like a trickle of blood trying to serve a heart hope-lessly clogged with cholesterol.

Weaver checked the numbers on the side by the right front headlight. 744. Yes, that was the number they'd gotten from dispatch, all right.

The flashers were on and everything looked kosher— until the door opened and the driver stepped out. He was wearing a blue suit, all right, but not the kind that came with gold buttons and a silver badge. His shoes weren't police issue either, unless Staunton and Weaver had missed a memo notify-ing officers that duty footwear would henceforth come from Gucci. That didn't seem likely. What seemed likely was that this was the creep who had hijacked the cops uptown. He got out oblivious to the honkings and cries of protest from the drivers trying to get by him.

"Goddam," Andy Staunton breathed.

Approach with extreme caution, the dispatcher had said. This man is armed and extremely dangerous. Dispatchers usually sounded like the most bored human beings on earth— for all Andy Staunton knew, they were—and so the almost awed emphasis this one put on the word extremely had stuck to his consciousness like a burr.

He drew his weapon for the first time in his four years on the force, and glanced at Weaver. Weaver had also drawn. The two of them were standing outside a deli about thirty feet from the IRT stairway. They had known each other long enough to be attuned to each other in a way only cops and professional soldiers can be. Without a word between them they stepped back into the doorway of the delicatessen, weapons pointing upward.

"Subway?" Weaver asked.

"Yeah." Andy took one quick glance at the entrance. Rush hour was in high gear now, and the subway stairs were clogged with people heading for their trains.

"We've got to take him right now, before he can get close to the crowd."

"Let's do it."

They stepped out of the doorway in perfect tandem, gun-slingers Roland would have recognized at once as adversaries much more dangerous than the first two. They were younger, for one thing; and although he didn't know it, some unknown dispatcher had labeled him extremely dangerous, and to Andy Staunton and Norris Weaver, that made him the equi-valent of a rogue tiger. If he doesn't stop the second I tell him to, he's dead, Andy thought.

"Hold it!" he screamed, dropping into a crouch with his gun held out before him in both hands. Beside him, Weaver had done the same. "Police! Get your hands on your he—"

That was as far as he got before the guy ran for the IRT stairway. He moved with a sudden speed that was uncanny. Nevertheless, Andy Staunton was wired, all his

dials turned up to the max. He swivelled on his heels, feeling a cloak of emotionless coldness drop over him—Roland would have known this, too. He had felt it many times in similar situations.

Andy led the running figure slightly, then squeezed the trigger of his .38. He saw the man in the blue suit spin around, trying to keep his feet. Then he fell to the pavement, as commuters who, only seconds ago, had been concentrating on nothing but surviving another trip home on the subway, screamed and scattered like quail. They had discovered there was more to survive than the uptown train this afternoon.

"Holy fuck, partner," Norris Wheaton breathed, "you blew him away."

"I know," Andy said. His voice didn't falter. The gunslinger would have admired it. "Let's go see who he was."

11

I'm dead! Jack Mort was screaming. I'm dead, you've gotten me killed, I'm dead, I'm—

No, the gunslinger responded. Through slitted eyes he saw the cops approaching, guns still out. Younger and faster than the ones who had been parked near the gun-shop. Faster. And at least one of them was a hell of a shot. Mort—and Roland along with him—should have been dead, dying, or seriously wounded. Andy Staunton had shot to kill, and his bullet had drilled through the left lapel of Mort's suit-coat. It had likewise punched through the pocket of Mort's Arrow shirt—but that was as far as it went. The life of both men, the one inside and the one outside, were saved by Mort's lighter.

Mort didn't smoke, but his boss—whose job Mort had confidently expected to have himself by this time next year— did. Accordingly, Mort had bought a two hundred dollar silver lighter at Dunhill's. He did not light every cigarette Mr.

Framingham stuck in his gob when the two of them were together— that would have made him look too much like an ass-kisser. Just once in awhile . . . and usually when someone even higher up was present, someone who could appreciate a.) Jack Mort's quiet courtesy, and b.) Jack Mort's good taste.

Do-Bees covered all the bases.

This time covering the bases saved his life and Roland's. Staunton's bullet smashed the silver lighter instead of Mort's heart (which was generic; Mort's passion for brand names— good brand names—stopped mercifully at the skin). He was hurt just the same, of course. When you were hit by a heavy-caliber slug, there was no such thing as a free ride. The lighter was driven against his chest hard enough to create a hollow. It flattened and then smashed apart, digging shallow grooves in Mort's skin; one sliver of shrapnel sliced Mort's left nipple almost in two. The hot slug also ignited the lighter's fluid-soaked batting.

Nevertheless, the gunslinger lay still as they approached. The one who had not shot him was telling people to stay back, just stay back, goddammit.

I'm on fire! Mort shrieked. I'm on fire, put it out! Put it out! PUT IT OWWWWWW—

The gunslinger lay still, listening to the grit of the gun-slingers' shoes on the pavement, ignoring Mort's shrieks, try-ing to ignore the coal suddenly glowing against his chest and the smell of frying flesh.

A foot slid beneath his ribcage, and when it lifted, the gunslinger allowed himself to roll bonelessly onto his back. Jack Mort's eyes were open. His face was slack. In spite of the shattered, burning remains of the lighter, there was

no sign of the man screaming inside.

"God," someone muttered, "did you shoot him with a tracer, man?"

Smoke was rising from the hole in the lapel of Mort's coat in a neat little stream. It was escaping around the edge of the lapel in more untidy blotches.

The cops could smell burning flesh as the wadding in the smashed lighter, soaked with Ronson lighter fluid, really began to blaze.

Andy Staunton, who had performed faultlessly thus far, now made his only mistake, one for which Cort would have sent him home with a fat ear in spite of his earlier admirable performance, telling him one mistake was all it took, took to get a man killed most of the time. Staunton had been able to shoot the guy—a thing no cop really knows if he can do until he's faced with a situation where he must find out—but the idea that his bullet had somehow set the guy on fire filled him with unreasoning horror. So he bent forward to put it out without thinking, and the gunslinger's feet smashed into his belly before he had time to do more than register the blaze of awareness in eyes he would have sworn were dead.

Staunton went flailing back into his partner. His pistol flew from his hand.

Wheaton held onto his own, but by the time he had gotten clear of Staunton, he heard a shot and his gun was magically gone. The hand it had been in felt numb, as if it had been struck with a very large hammer.

The guy in the blue suit got up, looked at them for a moment and said, "You're good. Better than the others. So let me advise you. Don't follow. This is almost over. I don't want to have to kill you."

Then he whirled and ran for the subway stairs.

12

The stairs were choked with people who had reversed their downward course when the yelling and shooting started, obsessed with that morbid and somehow unique New Yorkers' curiosity to see how bad, how many, how much blood spilled on the dirty concrete. Yet somehow they still found a way to shrink back from the man in the blue suit who came plunging down the stairs. It wasn't much wonder. He was holding a gun, and another was strapped around his waist.

Also, he appeared to be on fire.

13

Roland ignored Mort's increasing shrieks of pain as his shirt, undershirt, and jacket began to burn more briskly, as the silver of the lighter began to melt and run down his midsection to his belly in burning tracks.

He could smell dirty moving air, could hear the roar of an oncoming train.

This was almost the time; the moment had almost come around, the moment when he would draw the three or lose it all. For the second time he seemed to feel worlds tremble and reel about his head.

He reached the platform level and tossed the .38 aside. He unbuckled Jack Mort's pants and pushed them casually down, revealing a pair of white underdrawers like a whore's panties. He had no time to reflect on this oddity. If he did not move fast, he could stop worrying about burning alive; the bullets he had purchased would get hot enough to go off and this body would simply explode.

The gunslinger stuffed the boxes of bullets into the underdrawers, took out the



bottle of Keflex, and did the same with it. Now the underdrawers bulged grotesquely. He stripped off the flaming suit-jacket, but made no effort to take off the flaming shirt.

He could hear the train roaring toward the platform, could see its light. He had no way of knowing it was a train which kept the same route as the one which had run over Odetta, but all the same he did know. In matters of the Tower, fate became a thing as merciful as the lighter which had saved his life and as painful as the fire the miracle had ignited. Like the wheels of the oncoming train, it followed a course both logical and crushingly brutal, a course against which only steel and sweetness could stand.

He picked up Mort's pants and began to run again, barely aware of the people scattering out of his way. As more air fed the fire, first his shirt collar and then his hair began to burn. The heavy boxes in Mort's underdrawers slammed against his balls again and again, mashing them; excruciating pain rose into his gut. He jumped the turnstile, a man who was becoming a meteor. Put me out! Mort screamed. Put me out before I burn up!

You ought to burn, the gunslinger thought grimly. What's going to happen to you is more merciful than you deserve.

What do you mean? WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

The gunslinger didn't answer; in fact turned him off entirely as he pelted toward the edge of the platform. He felt one of the boxes of shells trying to slip out of Mort's ridiculous panties and held it with one hand.

He sent out every bit of his mental force toward the Lady. He had no idea if such a telepathic command could be heard, or if the hearer could be compelled to obey, but he sent it just the same, a swift, sharp arrow of thought:

THE DOOR! LOOK THROUGH THE DOOR! NOW! NOW!

Train-thunder filled the world. A woman screamed "Oh my God he's going to jump!"

A hand slapped at his shoulder, trying to pull him back. Then Roland pushed the body of Jack Mort past the yellow warning line and dove over the edge of the platform. He fell into the path of the oncoming train with his hands cupping his crotch, holding the luggage he would bring back ... if, that was, he was fast enough to get out of Mort at just the right instant. As he fell he called her—them—again:

ODETTA HOLMES! DETTA WALKER! LOOK NOW!

As he called, as the train bore down upon him, its wheels turning with merciless silver speed, the gunslinger finally turned his head and looked back through the door.

And directly into her face.

Faces!

Both of them, I see both of them at the same time—

NOO—! Mort shrieked, and in the last split second before the train ran him down, cutting him in two not above the knees but at the waist, Roland lunged at the door . . . and through it.

Jack Mort died alone.

The boxes of ammunition and the bottle of pills appeared beside Roland's physical body. His hands clenched spasmodically at them, then relaxed. The gunslinger forced himself up, aware that he was wearing his sick, throbbing body again, aware that Eddie Dean was screaming, aware that Odetta was shrieking in two voices. He looked—only for a moment—and saw exactly what he had heard: not one woman but two. Both were legless, both dark-skinned, both women of great

beauty. Nonetheless, one of them was a hag, her interior ugliness not hidden by her outer beauty but enhanced by it.

Roland stared at these twins who were not really twins at all but negative and positive images of the same woman. He stared with a feverish, hypnotic intensity.

Then Eddie screamed again and the gunslinger saw the lobstrosities tumbling out of the waves and strutting toward the place where Detta had left him, trussed and helpless.

The sun was down. Darkness had come.

14

Detta saw herself in the doorway, saw herself through her eyes, saw herself through the gunslinger's eyes, and her sense of dislocation was as sudden as Eddie's, but much more violent.

She was here.

She was there, in the gunslinger's eyes.

She heard the oncoming train.

Odetta! she screamed, suddenly understanding every-thing: what she was and when it had happened.

Delta! she screamed, suddenly understanding everything: what she was and who had done it.

A brief sensation of being turned inside out. . . and then a much more agonizing one.

She was being torn apart.

15

Roland shambled down the short slope to the place where Eddie lay. He moved like a man who has lost his bones. One of the lobster-things clawed at Eddie's face.

Eddie screamed. The gunslinger booted it away. He bent rustily and grabbed Eddie's arms. He began to drag him backwards, but it was too late, his strength was too little, they were going to get Eddie, hell, both of them—

Eddie screamed again as one of the lobstrosities asked him did-a-chick? and then tore a swatch of his pants and a chunk of meat to go along with it. Eddie tried another scream, but nothing came out but a choked gargle. He was strangling in Delta's knots.

The things were all around them, closing in, claws click-ing eagerly. The gunslinger threw the last of his strength into a final yank . . . and tumbled backwards. He heard them coming, them with their hellish questions and clicking claws. Maybe it wasn't so bad, he thought. He had staked everything, and that was all he had lost.

The thunder of his own guns filled him with stupid wonder.

16

The two women lay face to face, bodies raised like snakes about to strike, fingers with identical prints locked around throats marked with identical lines. The woman was trying to kill her but the woman was not real, no more than the girl had been real; she was a dream created by a falling brick . . . but now the

dream was real, the dream was clawing her throat and trying to kill her as the gunslinger tried to save his friend. The dream-made-real was screeching obscenities and raining hot spittle into her face. "I took the blue plate because that woman landed me in the hospital and besides I didn't get no forspecial plate an I bust it cause it needed bustin an when I saw a white boy I could bust why I bust him too I hurt the white boys because they needed hurtin I stole from the stores that only sell things that are forspecial to whitefolks while the brothers and sisters go hungry in Harlem and the rats eat their babies, I'm the one, you bitch, I'm the one, I... I... I!

Kill her, Odetta thought, and knew she could not.

She could no more kill the hag and survive than the hag could kill her and walk away. They could choke each other to death while Eddie and the

(Roland)/(Really Bad Man)

one who had called them were eaten alive down there by the edge of the water.

That would finish all of them. Or she could

(love)/(hate)

let go.

Odetta let go of Delta's throat, ignored the fierce hands throttling her, crushing her windpipe. Instead of using her own hands to choke, she used them to embrace the other.

"No, you bitch!" Delta screamed, but that scream was infinitely complex, both hateful and grateful. "No, you leave me lone, you jes leave me—"

Odetta had no voice with which to reply. As Roland kicked the first attacking lobstrosity away and as the second moved in lo lunch on a chunk of Eddie's arm, she could only whisper in the witch-woman's ear: "I love you."

For a moment the hands tightened into a killing noose . . . and then loosened.

Were gone.

She was being turned inside out again . . . and then, suddenly, blessedly, she was whole. For the first time since a man named Jack Mort had dropped a brick on the head of a child who was only there to be hit because a white taxi driver had taken one look and driven away (and had not her father, in his pride, refused to try again for fear of a second refusal), she was whole. She was Odetta Holmes, but the other—?

Hurry up, bitch! Detta yelled. . . but it was still her own voice; she and Detta had merged. She had been one; she had been two; now the gunslinger had drawn a third from her. Hurry up or they gonna be dinner!

She looked at the shells. There was no time to use them; by the time she had his guns reloaded it would be over. She could only hope.

But is there anything else? she asked herself, and drew.

And suddenly her brown hands were full of thunder.

17

Eddie saw one of the lobstrosities loom over his face, its rugose eyes dead yet hideously sparkling with hideous life. Its claws descended toward his face.

Dod-a—, it began, and then it was smashed backward in chunks and splatters.

Roland saw one skitter toward his flailing left hand and thought There goes the other hand . . . and then the lobstrosity was a splatter of shell and green guts flying into the dark air.

He twisted around and saw a woman whose beauty was heart stopping, whose fury

was heart-freezing. "COME ON, MAHFAHS!" she screamed. "YOU JUST COME ON! YOU JUST COME FOR EM! I'M GONNA BLOW YO EYES RIGHT BACK THROUGH YO FUCKIN ASSHOLES!"

She blasted a third one that was crawling rapidly between Eddie's spraddled legs, meaning to eat on him and neuter him at the same time. It flew like a tiddly-wink.

Roland had suspected they had some rudimentary intelligence; now he saw the proof.

The others were retreating.

The hammer of one revolver fell on a dud, and then she blew one of the retreating monsters into gobbets.

The others ran back toward the water even faster. It seemed they had lost their appetite.

Meanwhile, Eddie was strangling.

Roland fumbled at the rope digging a deep furrow into his neck. He could see Eddie's face melting slowly from purple to black. Eddie's strugglings were weakening.

Then his hands were pushed away by stronger ones.

"I'll take care of it. "There was a knife in her hand. . . his knife.

Take care of what? he thought as his consciousness faded. What is it you'll take care of, now that we're both at your mercy?

"Who are you?" he husked, as darkness deeper than night began to take him down.

"I am three women," he heard her say, and it was as if she were speaking to him from the top of a deep well into which he was falling. "I who was; I who had no right to be but was; I am the woman who you have saved.

"I thank you, gunslinger."

She kissed him, he knew that, but for a long time after, Roland knew only darkness.

final shuffle

1

For the first time in what seemed like a thousand years, the gunslinger was not thinking about the Dark Tower. He thought only about the deer which had come down to the pool in the woodland clearing.

He sighted over the fallen log with his left hand.

Meat, he thought, and fired as saliva squirted warmly into his mouth.

Missed, he thought in the millisecond following the shot. It's gone. All my skill. . . gone.

The deer fell dead at the edge of the pool.

Soon the Tower would fill him again, but now he only blessed what gods there were that his aim was still true, and thought of meat, and meat, and meat. He re-holstered the gun—the only one he wore now—and climbed over the log behind which he had patiently lain as late afternoon drew down to dusk, waiting for

something big enough to eat to come to the pool.

I am getting well, he thought with some amazement as he drew his knife. I am really getting well.

He didn't see the woman standing behind him, watching with assessing brown eyes.

2

They had eaten nothing but lobster-meat and had drunk nothing but brackish stream water for six days following the confrontation at the end of the beach. Roland remembered very little of that time; he had been raving, delirious. He sometimes called Eddie Alain, sometimes Cuthbert, and always he called the woman Susan.

His fever had abated little by little, and they began the laborious trek into the hills. Eddie pushed the woman in the chair some of the time, and sometimes Roland rode in it while Eddie carried her piggyback, her arms locked loosely around his neck. Most of the time the way made it impossible for either to ride, and that made the going slow. Roland knew how exhausted Eddie was. The woman knew, too, but Eddie never complained.

They had food; during the days when Roland lay between life and death, smoking with fever, reeling and railing of times long past and people long dead, Eddie and the woman killed again and again and again. Bye and bye the lobstrosities began staying away from their part of the beach, but by then they had plenty of meat, and when they at last got into an area where weeds and slutgrass grew, all three of them ate compulsively of it. They were starved for greens, any greens. And, little by little, the sores on their skins began to fade. Some of the grass was bitter, some sweet, but they ate no matter what the taste. . . except once. The gunslinger had wakened from a tired doze and seen the woman yanking at a handful of grass he recognized all too well.

"No! Not that!" he croaked. "Never that! Mark it, and remember it! Never that!" She looked at him for a long moment and put it aside without asking for an explanation.

The gunslinger lay back, cold with the closeness of it. Some of the other grasses might kill them, but what the woman had pulled would damn her. It had been devil-weed.

The Keflex had brought on explosions in his bowels, and he knew Eddie had been worried about that, but eating the grasses had controlled it.

Eventually they had reached real woods, and the sound of the Western Sea diminished to a dull drone they heard only when the wind was right.

And now . . . meat.

3

The gunslinger reached the deer and tried to gut it with the knife held between the third and fourth fingers of his right hand. No good. His fingers weren't strong enough. He switched the knife to his stupid hand, and managed a clumsy cut from the deer's groin to its chest. The knife let out the steaming blood before it could congeal in the meat and spoil it . . . but it was still a bad cut. A puking child could have done better.

You are going to learn to be smart, he told his left hand, and prepared to cut again, deeper.

Two brown hands closed over his one and took the knife.  
Roland looked around.  
"I'll do it," Susannah said.  
"Have you ever?"  
"No, but you'll tell me how."  
"All right."  
"Meat," she said, and smiled at him.  
"Yes," he said, and smiled back. "Meat."  
"What's happening?" Eddie called. "I heard a shot."  
"Thanksgiving in the making!" she called back. "Come help!"  
Later they ate like two kings and a queen, and as the gunslinger drowsed toward sleep, looking up at the stars, feeling the clean coolness in this upland air, he thought that this was the closest he had come to contentment in too many years to count.  
He slept. And dreamed.

4

It was the Tower. The Dark Tower.  
It stood on the horizon of a vast plain the color of blood in the violent setting of a dying sun. He couldn't see the stairs which spiraled up and up and up within its brick shell, but he could see the windows which spiraled up along that staircase's way, and saw the ghosts of all the people he had ever known pass through them. Up and up they marched, and an arid wind brought him the sound of voices calling his name.  
Roland . . . come . . . Roland . . . come . . . come . . . , come ...  
"I come," he whispered, and awoke sitting bolt upright, sweating and shivering as if the fever still held his flesh.  
"Roland?"  
Eddie.  
"Yes."  
"Bad dream?"  
"Bad. Good. Dark."  
"The Tower?"  
"Yes."  
They looked toward Susannah, but she slept on, undis-turbed. Once there had been a woman named Odetta Susan-nah Holmes; later, there had been another named Delta Susannah Walker. Now there was a third: Susannah Dean.  
Roland loved her because she would fight and never give in; he feared for her because he knew he would sacrifice her— Eddie as well—without a question or a look back.  
For the Tower.  
The God-Damned Tower.  
"Time for a pill," Eddie said.  
"I don't want them anymore."  
"Take it and shut up."  
Roland swallowed it with cold stream-water from one of the skins, then burped.  
He didn't mind. It was a meaty burp.  
Eddie asked, "Do you know where we're going?"  
"To the Tower."

"Well, yeah," Eddie said, "but that's like me being some ignoramus from Texas without a road-map saying he's going to Achin' Asshole, Alaska. Where is it? Which direction?"

"Bring me my purse."

Eddie did. Susannah stirred and Eddie paused, his face red planes and black shadows in the dying embers of the campfire. When she rested easy again, he came back to Roland.

Roland rummaged in the purse, heavy now with shells from that other world. It was short enough work to find what he wanted in what remained of his life.

The jawbone.

The jawbone of the man in black.

"We'll stay here awhile," he said, "and I'll get well."

"You'll know when you are?"

Roland smiled a little. The shakes were abating, the sweat drying in the cool night breeze. But still, in his mind, he saw those figures, those knights and friends and lovers and ene-mies of old, circling up and up, seen briefly in those windows and then gone; he saw the shadow of the Tower in which they were pent struck black and long across a plain of blood and death and merciless trial.

"I won't," he said, and nodded at Susannah. "But she will."

"And then?"

Roland held up the jawbone of Walter. "This once spoke."

He looked at Eddie.

"It will speak again."

"It's dangerous." Eddie's voice was flat.

"Yes."

"Not just to you."

"No."

"I love her, man."

"Yes."

"If you hurt her—"

"I'll do what I need to," the gunslinger said.

"And we don't matter? Is that it?"

"I love you both." The gunslinger looked at Eddie, and Eddie saw that Roland's cheeks glistened red in what remained of the campfire's embered dying glow. He was weeping.

"That doesn't answer the question. You'll go on, won't you?"

"Yes."

"To the very end."

"Yes. To the very end."

"No matter what." Eddie looked at him with love and hate and all the aching dearness of one man's dying hopeless helpless reach for another man's mind and will and need.

The wind made the trees moan.

"You sound like Henry, man." Eddie had begun to cry himself. He didn't want to. He hated to cry. "He had a tower, too, only it wasn't dark. Remember me telling you about Henry's tower? We were brothers, and I guess we were gunslingers. We had this White Tower, and he asked me to go after it with him the only way he could ask, so I saddled up, because he was my brother, you dig it? We got there, too. Found the White Tower. But it was poison. It killed him. It would have

killed me. You saw me. You saved more than my life. You saved my fuckin soul."

Eddie held Roland and kissed his cheek. Tasted his tears.

"So what? Saddle up again? Go on and meet the man again?"

The gunslinger said not a word.

"I mean, we haven't seen many people, but I know they're up ahead, and whenever there's a Tower involved, there's a man. You wait for the man because you gotta meet the man, and in the end money talks and bullshit walks, or maybe here it's bullets instead of bucks that do the talking. So is that it? Saddle up? Go to meet the man? Because if it's just a replay of the same old shitstorm, you two should have left me for the lobsters." Eddie looked at him with dark-ringed eyes. "I been dirty, man. If I found out anything, it's that I don't want to die dirty."

"It's not the same."

"No? You gonna tell me you're not hooked?"

Roland said nothing.

"Who's gonna come through some magic door and save you, man? Do you know? I do. No one. You drew all you could draw. Only thing you can draw from now on is a fucking gun, because that's all you got left. Just like Balazar."

Roland said nothing.

"You want to know the only thing my brother ever had to teach me?" His voice was hitching and thick with tears.

"Yes," the gunslinger said. He leaned forward, his eyes intent upon Eddie's eyes.

"He taught me if you kill what you love, you're damned."

"I am damned already," Roland said calmly. "But per-haps even the damned may be saved."

"Are you going to get all of us killed?"

Roland said nothing.

Eddie seized the rags of Roland's shirt. "Are you going to get her killed?"

"We all die in time," the gunslinger said. "It's not just the world that moves on." He looked squarely at Eddie, his faded blue eyes almost the color of slate in this light. "But we will be magnificent." He paused. "There's more than a world to win, Eddie. I would not risk you and her—I would not have allowed the boy to die—if that was all there was."

"What are you talking about?"

"Everything there is," the gunslinger said calmly. "We are going to go, Eddie.

We are going to fight. We are going to be hurt. And in the end we will stand."

Now it was Eddie who said nothing. He could think of nothing to say.

Roland gently grasped Eddie's arm. "Even the damned love," he said.

5

Eddie eventually slept beside Susannah, the third Roland had drawn to make a new three, but Roland sat awake and listened to voices in the night while the wind dried the tears on his cheeks.

Damnation?

Salvation?

The Tower.

He would come to the Dark Tower and there he would sing their names; there he would sing their names; there he would sing all their names.



The sun stained the east a dusky rose, and at last Roland, no longer the last gunslinger but one of the last three, slept and dreamed his angry dreams through which there ran only that one soothing blue thread:  
There I will sing all their names!

#### AFTERWORD

This completes the second of six or seven books which make up a long tale called The Dark Tower. The third, The Waste Lands, details half of the quest of Roland, Eddie, and Susannah to reach the Tower; the fourth, Wizard and Glass, tells of an enchantment and a seduction but mostly of those things which befell Roland before his readers first met him upon the trail of the man in black.

My surprise at the acceptance of the first volume of this work, which is not at all like the stories for which I am best known, is exceeded only by my gratitude to those who have read it and liked it. This work seems to be my own Tower, you know; these people haunt me, Roland most of all. Do I really know what that Tower is, and what awaits Roland there (should he reach it, and you must prepare yourself for the very real possibility that he will not be the one to do so)?

Yes . . . and no. All I know is that the tale has called to me again and again over a period of seventeen years. This longer second volume, still leaves many questions unanswered and the story's climax far in the future, but I feel that it is a much more complete volume than the first.

And the Tower is closer.

Stephen King December 1st, 1986

STEPHEN KING, the world's bestselling novelist, is the author of more than thirty books, most recently Desperation, Rose Madder, Insomnia, and The Green Mile. His four volumes in the Dark Tower series, including The Gunslinger, The Waste Lands, and the latest, Wizard and Glass, are all available in Plume trade paperback editions. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.

## THE ROSE

IT BEGAN TO OPEN before his eyes. It disclosed a dark scarlet furnace, petal upon secret petal, each blazing with its own secret fury. Jake had never seen anything so beautiful, so intensely and utterly alive. Now, as he stretched one grime-streaked hand out toward this won-der, the voices began to sing his own name . . . and a dreadful, deadly fear began to steal in toward the center of his heart. It was as cold as black ice and as heavy as stone.

There was something wrong here. He could feel it pulsing in dis-cord, like a deep and ugly scratch across some formerly priceless work of art. . . . Then the heart of the rose opened before him, exposing a bright yellow dazzle of light. ... It was a sun: a vast forge blazing at the center of this rose growing in the alien grass.

The fear returned, only now it had become outright terror. It's right, he thought incoherently, everything here is right, but it could go wrong. ...

THE WASTE LANDS  
STEPHEN KING

THE DARK TOWER III

ILLUSTRATED BY NED DAMERON

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This third volume of the tale is gratefully dedicated to my son OWEN PHILIP KING: Khef, Ka, and Ka-tet.

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ARGUMENT

The Waste Lands is the third volume of a longer tale inspired by and to some degree dependent upon Robert Browning's narrative poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

The first volume, The Gunslinger, tells how Roland, the last gun-slinger in a world which has "moved on," pursues and finally catches the man in black, a sorcerer named Walter who falsely claimed the friendship of Roland's father in the days when the unity of Mid-World still held. Catching this half-human spell-caster is not Roland's ultimate goal but only another landmark along the road to the powerful and mysterious Dark Tower, which stands at the nexus of time.

Who, exactly, is Roland? What was his world like before it moved on? What is the Tower and why does he pursue it? We have only frag-mentary answers. Roland is clearly a land of knight, one of those charged with holding (or possibly redeeming) a world Roland remembers as being "filled with love and light." Just how closely Roland's memory resembles the way that world actually was is very much open to question, however.

We do know that he was forced to an early trial of manhood after discovering that his mother had become the mistress of Marten, a much greater sorcerer than Walter; we know that Marten orchestrated Roland's discovery of his mother's affair, expecting Roland to fail his test of manhood and be "sent West" into the wastes; we know that Roland laid Marten's plans at nines by passing the test.

We also know that the gunslinger's world is related to our own in some strange but fundamental way, and that passage between the worlds is sometimes possible. At a way station on a long-deserted coach-road running through the desert, Roland meets a boy named Jake who died in our world, a boy who was, in fact, pushed from a mid-Manhattan street corner and into the path of an oncoming car. Jake Chambers died with the man in black—Walter—peering down at him, and awoke in Roland's world.

Before they reach the man in black, Jake dies again . . . this time because the gunslinger, faced with the second most agonizing choice of his life, elects to sacrifice this symbolic son. Given a choice between the Tower and the child, Roland chooses the Tower. Jake's last words to the gunslinger before plunging into the abyss are: "Go, then—there are other worlds than these."

The final confrontation between Roland and Walter occurs in a dusty Golgotha of decaying bones. The man in black tells Roland's future with a deck of Tarot cards. Three very strange cards—The Prisoner, The Lady of the Shadows, and Death ("but not for you, gunslinger")—are called especially to Roland's attention.

The second volume, *The Drawing of the Three*, begins on the edge of the Western Sea not long after Roland's confrontation with Walter has ended. An exhausted gunslinger awakes in the middle of the night to discover that the incoming tide has brought a horde of crawling, carnivorous creatures—"lobstrosities"—with it. Before he can escape their limited range, Roland has been seriously wounded by these creatures, losing the first two fingers of his right hand to them. He is also poisoned by the venom of the lobstrosities, and as the gunslinger resumes his journey north along the edge of the Western Sea, he is sickening . . . perhaps dying.

He encounters three doors standing freely upon the beach. Each door opens—for Roland and Roland alone—upon our world; upon the city where Jake lived, in fact. Roland visits New York at three points along our time continuum, both in an effort to save his own life and to draw the three who must accompany him on his road to the Tower.

Eddie Dean is *The Prisoner*, a heroin addict from the New York of the late 1980s. Roland steps through the door on the beach of his world and into Eddie Dean's mind as Eddie, serving a man named Enrico Balazar as a cocaine mule, lands at JFK airport. In the course of their harrowing adventures together, Roland is able to obtain a limited quantity of penicillin and to bring Eddie Dean back to his own world. Eddie, a junkie who discovers he has been kidnapped to a world where there is no junk (or Popeye's fried chicken, for that matter), is less than overjoyed to be there.

The second door leads Roland to *The Lady of the Shadows*—actually two women in one body. This time Roland finds himself in the New York of the early 1960s and face to face with a young wheelchair-bound civil-rights activist named Odetta Holmes. The woman hidden inside Odetta is the crafty and hate-filled Detta Walker. When this double woman is pulled into Roland's world, the results are volatile for Eddie and the rapidly sickening gunslinger. Odetta believes that what's happening to her is either a dream or a delusion; Detta, a much more brutally direct intellect, simply dedicates herself to the task of killing Roland and Eddie whom she sees as torturing white devils.

Jack Mort, a serial killer hiding behind the third door (the New York of the mid-1970s), is *Death*. Mort has twice caused great changes in the life of Odetta

Holmes/Detta Walker, although neither of them knows it. Mort, whose *modus operandi* is to either push his victims or drop some-thing on them from above, has done both to Odetta during the course of his mad (but oh so careful) career. When Odetta was a child, he dropped a brick on her head, sending the little girl into a coma and also occasioning the birth of Detta Walker, Odetta's hidden sister. Years later, in 1959, Mort encounters Odetta again and pushes her into the path of an oncoming subway train in Greenwich Village. Odetta survives Mort again, but at a price: the oncoming train severed both legs at the knee. Only the presence of a heroic young doctor (and, perhaps, the ugly but indomitable spirit of Detta Walker) saves her life ... or so it would seem. To Roland's eye, these interrelationships suggest a power greater than mere coincidence; he believes the titanic forces, which surround the Dark Tower, have begun to gather once again.

Roland learns that Mort may stand at the heart of another mystery as well, one which is also a potentially mind-destroying paradox. For the victim Mort is stalking at the time the gunslinger steps into his life is none other than Jake, the boy Roland met at the way station and lost under the mountains. Roland has never had any cause to doubt Jake's story of how he died in our world, or any cause to question who Jake's murderer was—Walter, of course. Jake saw him dressed as a priest as the crowd gathered around the spot where he lay dying, and Roland has never doubted the description.

Nor does he doubt it now; Walter was there, oh yes, no doubt about that. But suppose it was Jack Mort, not Walter, who pushed Jake into the path of the oncoming Cadillac? Is such a thing possible? Roland can't say, not for sure, but if that is the case, where is Jake now? Dead? Alive?

Caught somewhere in time? And if Jake Chambers is still alive and well in his own world of Manhattan in the mid-1970s, how is it that Roland still remembers him?

Despite this confusing and possibly dangerous development, the test of the doors—and the drawing of the three—ends in success for Roland. Eddie Dean accepts his place in Roland's world because he has fallen in love with The Lady of the Shadows. Detta Walker and Odetta Holmes, the other two of Roland's three, are driven together into one personality combining elements of both Detta and Odetta when the gunslinger is finally able to force the two personalities to acknowledge each other. This hybrid is able to accept and return Eddie's love. Odetta Susannah Holmes and Detta Susannah Walker thus become a new woman, a third woman: Susannah Dean.

Jack Mort dies beneath the wheels of the same subway—that fabled A-train—which took Odetta's legs fifteen or sixteen years before. No great loss there.

And for the first time in untold years, Roland of Gilead is no longer alone in his quest for the Dark Tower. Cuthbert and Alain, his lost companions of yore, have been replaced by Eddie and Susannah . . . but the gunslinger has a way of being bad medicine for his friends. Very bad medicine, indeed.

The Waste Lands takes up the story of these three pilgrims on the face of Mid-World some months after the confrontation by the final door on the beach. They have moved some fair way inland. The period of rest is ending, and a period of learning has begun. Susannah is learning to shoot . . . Eddie is learning to carve . . . and the gunslinger is learning how it feels to lose one's mind, a piece at a time.

(One further note: My New York readers will know that I have taken certain geographical liberties with the city. For these I hope I may be forgiven.)

A heap of broken images, where the sun heats.  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only  
There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow in the morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.  
—T. S. ELIOT "The Waste Land"

If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk  
Above its mates, the head was chopped; the bents  
Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents  
In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to balk  
All hope of greenness? 'tis a brute must walk  
Pashing their life out, with a brute's intents.  
—ROBERT BROWNING "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came"

"What river is it?" enquired Millicent idly.  
"It's only a stream. Well, perhaps a little more than that.  
It's called the Waste."  
"Is it really?"  
"Yes," said Winifred, "it is."  
—ROBERT AICKMAN "Hand in Glove"



BOOK ONE  
JAKE  
FEAR IN A HANDFUL OF DUST

I • BEAR AND BONE

I BEAR AND BONE

1  
IT WAS HER THIRD time with live ammunition . . . and her first time on the draw from the holster Roland had rigged for her.  
They had plenty of live rounds; Roland had brought back better than three hundred from the world where Eddie and Susannah Dean had lived their lives up

until the time of their drawing. But having ammunition in plenty did not mean it could be wasted; quite the contrary, in fact. The gods frowned upon wastrels. Roland had been raised, first by his father and then by Cort, his greatest teacher, to believe this, and so he still believed. Those gods might not punish at once, but sooner or later the penance would have to be paid . . . and the longer the wait, the greater the weight.

At first there had been no need for live ammunition, anyway. Roland had been shooting for more years than the beautiful brown-skinned woman in the wheelchair would believe. He had corrected her at first simply by watching her aim and dry-fire at the targets he had set up. She learned fast. Both she and Eddie learned fast.

As he had suspected, both were born gunslingers.

Today Roland and Susannah had come to a clearing less than a mile from the camp in the woods which had been home to them for almost two months now. The days had passed with their own sweet similarity. The gunslinger's body healed itself while Eddie and Susannah learned the things the gunslinger had to teach them: how to shoot, to hunt, to gut and clean what they had killed; how to first stretch, then tan and cure the hides of those kills; how to use as much as it was possible to use so that no part of the animal was wasted; how to find north by Old Star or south by Old Mother; how to listen to the forest in which they now found themselves, sixty miles or more northeast of the Western Sea. Today Eddie had stayed behind, and the gunslinger was not put out of countenance by this. The lessons which are remembered the longest, Roland knew, are always the ones that are self-taught.

But what had always been the most important lesson was still most important: how to shoot and how to hit what you shot at every time. How to kill.

The edges of this clearing had been formed by dark, sweet-smelling fir trees that curved around it in a ragged semicircle. To the south, the ground broke off and dropped three hundred feet in a series of crumbling shale ledges and fractured cliffs, like a giant's set of stairs. A clear stream ran out of the woods and across the center of the clearing, first bubbling through a deep channel in the spongy earth and friable stone, then pouring across the splintery rock floor which sloped down to the place where the land dropped away. The water descended the steps in a series of waterfalls and made any number of pretty, wavering rainbows. Beyond the edge of the drop-off was a magnificent deep valley, choked with more firs and a few great old elm trees which refused to be crowded out. These latter towered green and lush, trees which might have been old when the land from which Roland had come was yet young; he could see no sign that the valley had ever burned, although he supposed it must have drawn lightning at some time or other. Nor would lightning have been the only danger. There had been people in this forest in some distant time; Roland had come across their leavings on several occasions over the past weeks. They were primitive artifacts, for the most part, but they included shards of pottery which could only have been cast in fire. And fire was evil stuff that delighted in escaping the hands which created it.

Above this picturebook scene arched a blameless blue sky in which a few crows circled some miles off, crying in their old, rusty voices. They seemed restless, as if a storm were on the way, but Roland had sniffed the air and there was no rain in it.

A boulder stood to the left of the stream. Roland had set up six chips of stone on top of it. Each one was heavily flecked with mica, and they glittered like lenses in the warm afternoon light.

"Last chance," the gunslinger said. "If that holster's uncomfortable—even tinslightest bit—tell me now. We didn't come here to waste ammunition."

She cocked a sardonic eye at him, and for a moment he could see Detta Walker in there. It was like ha/y sunlight winking off a bar of steel. "What would you do if it was uncomfortable and I didn't tell you? If I missed all six of those itty bitty things? Whop me upside the head like that old teacher of yours used to do?"

The gunslinger smiled. He had done more smiling these last five weeks than he had done in the five years which had come before them. "I can't do that, and you know it. We were children, for one thing— children who hadn't been through our rites of manhood yet. You may slap a child to correct him, or her, but—"

"In my world, whoppin' the kiddies is also frowned on by the better class of people," Susannah said dryly.

Roland shrugged. It was hard for him to imagine that sort of world— did not the Great Book say "Spare not the birch so you spoil not the child"?—but he didn't believe Susannah was lying. "Your world has not moved on," he said. "Many things are different there. Did I not see for myself that it is so?"

"I guess you did."

"In any case, you and Eddie are not children. It would be wrong for me to treat you as if you were. And if tests were needed, you both passed them."

Although he did not say so, he was thinking of how it had ended on the beach, when she had blown three of the lumbering lobstrosities to hell before they could peel him and Eddie to the bone. He saw her answering smile and thought she might be remembering the same thing.

"So what you goan do if I shoot fo' shit?"

"I'll look at you. I think that's all I'll need to do."

She thought this over, then nodded. "Might be."

She tested the gunbelt again. It was slung across her bosom almost like a shoulder-holster (an arrangement Roland thought of as a docker's clutch) and looked simple enough, but it had taken many weeks of trial and error—and a great deal of tailoring—to get it just right. The belt and the revolver which cocked its eroded sandalwood grip out of the ancient oiled holster had once been the gunslinger's; the holster had hung on his right hip. He had spent much of the last five weeks coming to realize it was never going to hang there again. Thanks to the lobstrosi-ties, he was strictly a lefthanded gun now.

"So how is it?" he asked again.

This time she laughed up at him. "Roland, this ole gunbelt's as com'fable as it's ever gonna be. Now do. you want me to shoot or are we just going to sit and listen to crowmusic from over yonder?"

He felt tension worming sharp little fingers under his skin now, and he supposed Cort had felt much the same at times like this under his gruff, bluff exterior.

I le wanted her to be good ... needed her to be good. But to show how badly he wanted and needed—that could lead to disaster.

"Tell me your lesson again, Susannah."

She sighed in mock exasperation . . . but as she spoke her smile faded and her dark, beautiful face became solemn. And from her lips he heard the old catechism

again, made new in her mouth. He had never expected to hear these words from a woman. How natural they sounded . . . yet how strange and dangerous, as well.

" I do not aim with my hand; she who aims with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

" I aim with my eye.

" I do not shoot with my hand; she who shoots with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

" I shoot with my mind.

" I do not kill with my gun—" "

She broke off and pointed at the mica-shiny stones on the boulder.

"I'm not going to kill anything anyhow—they're just itty bitty rocks."

Her expression—a little haughty, a little naughty—suggested that she expected Roland to be exasperated with her, perhaps even angry. Roland, however, had been where she was now; he had not forgotten that apprentice gunslingers were fractious and high-spirited, nervy and apt to bite exactly at the wrong moment . . . and he had discovered an unexpected capacity in himself. He could teach. More, he liked to teach, and he found himself wondering, from time to time, if that had been true of Cort, as well. He guessed that it had been.

Now more crows began to call raucously, these from the forest behind them. Some part of Roland's mind registered the fact that the new cries were agitated rather than merely quarrelsome; these birds sounded as if they had been scared up and away from whatever they had been feeding on. He had more important things to think about than whatever it was that had scared a bunch of crows, however, so he simply filed the information away and refocused his concentration on Susannah. To do otherwise with a 'prentice was to ask for a second, less playful bite. And who would be to blame for that? Who but the teacher? For was he not training her to bite? Training both of them to bite? Wasn't that what a gunslinger was, when you stripped off the few stern lines of ritual and stilled the few iron grace-notes of catechism? Wasn't he (or she) only a human hawk, trained to bite on command?

"No," he said. "They're not rocks."

She raised her eyebrows a little and began to smile again. Now that she saw he wasn't going to explode at her as he sometimes did when she was slow or fractious (or at least not yet), her eyes again took on the mocking sun-on-steel glint he associated with Detta Walker. "They ain't?" The teasing in her voice was still good - nut u red, but he thought it would turn mean if he let it. She was tense, keyed up, her claws already halfway out of their sheaths.

"No, they ain't," he said, returning her mockery. His own smile began to return, but it was hard and humorless. "Susannah, do you remember the honk mahfahs?" Her smile began to fade.

"The honk mahfahs in Oxford Town?"

Her smile was gone.

"Do you remember what the honk mahfahs did to you and your friends?"

"That wasn't me," she said. "That was another woman." Her eyes had taken on a dull, sullen cast. He hated that look, but he also liked it just fine. It was the right look, the one that said the kindling was burning well and soon the bigger logs would start to catch.

"Yes. It was. Like it or not, it was Odetta Susannah Holmes, daugh-ter of Sarah Walker Holmes. Not you as you are, but you as you were. Remember the fire-hoses,

Susannah? Remember the gold teeth, how you saw them when they used the hoses on you and your friends in Oxford? How you saw them twinkle when they laughed?" She had told them these things, and many others, over many long nights as the campfire burned low. The gunslinger hadn't understood everything, but he had listened carefully, just the same. And remembered. Pain was a tool, after all. Sometimes it was the best tool.

"What's wrong with you, Roland? Why you want to go recallin that trash in my mind?"

Now the sullen eyes glinted at him dangerously; they reminded him of Alain's eyes when good-natured Alain was finally roused.

"Yonder stones are those men," Roland said softly. "The men who locked you in a cell and left you to foul yourself. The men with the clubs and the dogs. The men who called you a nigger cunt."

He pointed at them, moving his finger from left to right.

"There's the one who pinched your breast and laughed. There's the one who said he better check and see if you had something stuffed up your ass. There's the one who called you a chimpanzee in a five-hundred-dollar dress. That's the one that kept running his billyclub over the spokes of your wheelchair until you thought the sound would send you mad. There's the one who called your friend Leon pinko-fag. And the one on the end, Susannah, is Jack Mort.

"There. Those stones. Those men."

She was breathing rapidly now, her bosom rising and falling in swift little jerks beneath the gunslinger's gunbelt with its heavy freight of bullets. Her eyes had left him; they were looking at the mica-flecked chips of stone. Behind them and at some distance, a tree splintered and fell over. More crows called in the sky. Deep in the game which was no longer a game, neither of them noticed.

"Oh yeah?" she breathed. "That so?"

"It is. Now say your lesson, Susannah Dean, and be true." - This time the words fell from her lips like small chunks of ice. Her right hand trembled lightly on the arm of her wheelchair like an idling engine.

" 'I do not aim with my hand; she who aims with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

" 'I aim with my eye.' "

"Good."

" 'I do not shoot with my hand; she who shoots with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

" 'I shoot with my mind.' "

"So it has ever been, Susannah Dean."

" 'I do not kill with my gun; she who kills with her gun has forgotten the face of her father.

" 'I kill with my heart.' "

"Then KILL them, for your father's sake!" Roland shouted. "KILL THEM ALL!"

Her right hand was a blur between the arm of the chair and the butt of Roland's sixgun. It was out in a second, her left hand descending, fanning at the hammer in flutters almost as swift and delicate as the wing of a hummingbird. Six flat cracks pealed off across the valley, and five of the six chips of stone set atop the boulder blinked out of existence.

For a moment neither of them spoke—did not even breathe, it seemed—as the echoes rolled back and forth, dimming. Even the crows were silent, at least for the

time being.

The gunslinger broke the silence with four toneless yet oddly emphatic words:

"It is very well."

Susannah looked at the gun in her hand as if she had never seen it before. A tendril of smoke rose from the barrel, perfectly straight in the windless silence. Then, slowly, she returned it to the holster below her bosom.

"Good, but not perfect," she said at last. "I missed one."

"Did you?" He walked over to the boulder and picked up the remaining chip of stone. He glanced at it, then tossed it to her.

She caught it with her left; her right stayed near the bolstered gun, he saw with approval. She shot better and more naturally than Eddie, but had not learned this particular lesson as swiftly as Eddie had done.

If she had been with them during the shootout at Balazar's nightclub, she might have. Now, Roland saw, she was at last learning that, too. She looked at the stone and saw the notch, barely a sixteenth of an inch deep, in its upper corner.

"You only clipped it," Roland said, returning to her, "but in a shooting scrape, sometimes that's all you wed. If you clip a fellow, throw his aim off ..." He paused. "Why an- you looking at me that way?"

"You don't know, do you? You really don't?"

"No. Your mind is often closed to me, Susannah."

There was no defensiveness in his voice, and Susannah shook her head in exasperation. The rapid turn-and-turn-about dance of her person-ality sometimes unnerved him; his seeming inability to say anything other than exactly what was on his mind never failed to do the same to her. He was the most literal man she had ever met.

"All right," she said, "I'll tell you why I'm looking at you that way, Roland.

Because what you did was a mean trick. You said you wouldn't slap me, couldn't slap me, even if I cut up rough . . . but either you lied or you're very stupid, and I know you ain't stupid. People don't always slap with their hands, as every man and woman of my race could testify. We have a little rhyme where I come from: 'Sticks and stones will break my bones—'

"—yet taunts shall never wound me,' " Roland finished.

"Well, that's not exactly the way we say it, but I guess it's close enough. It's bullshit no matter how you say it. They don't call what you did a tongue-lashing for nothing. Your words hurt me, Roland—are you gonna stand there and say you didn't know they would?"

She sat in her chair, looking up at him with bright, stern curiosity, and Roland thought—not for the first time—that the honk mahfahs of Susannah's land must have been either very brave or very stupid to cross her, wheelchair or no wheelchair. And, having walked among them, he didn't think bravery was the answer.

"I did not think or care about your hurt," he said patiently. "I saw you show your teeth and knew you meant to bite, so I put a stick in your jaws. And it worked . . . didn't it?"

Her expression was now one of hurt astonishment. "You bastard!"

Instead of replying, he took the gun from her holster, fumbled the cylinder open with the remaining two fingers on his right hand, and began to reload the chambers with his left hand.

"Of all the high-handed, arrogant—"

"You needed to bite," he said in that same patient tone. "Had you not, you would have shot all wrong—with your hand and your gun instead of your eye and mind and heart. Was that a trick? Was it arrogant? I think not. I think. Susannah, that you were the one with arrogance in her heart. I think you were the one with a mind to get up to tricks. That doesn't distress me. Quite the opposite. A gunslinger without teeth is no gunslinger."

"Damn it, I'm not a gunslinger!"

He ignored that; he could afford to. If she was no gunslinger, then he was a billy-bumbler. "If we were playing a game, I might have behaved differently. But this is no game. It ..."

His good hand went to his forehead for a moment and paused there, fingers tented just above the left temple. The tips of the fingers, she saw, were trembling minutely.

"Roland, what's ailing you?" she asked quietly.

The hand lowered slowly. He rolled the cylinder back into place and replaced the revolver in the holster she wore. "Nothing."

"Yes there is. I've seen it. Eddie has, too. It started almost as soon as we left the beach. It's something wrong, and it's getting worse."

"There is nothing wrong," he repeated.

She put her hands out and took his. Her anger was gone, at least for the time being. She looked earnestly up into his eyes. "Eddie and I . . . this isn't our world, Roland. Without you, we'd die here. We'd have your guns, and we can shoot them, you've taught us to do that well enough, but we'd die just the same. We ... we depend on you. So tell me what's wrong. Let me try to help. Let us try to help."

He had never been a man who understood himself deeply or cared to; the concept of self-consciousness (let alone self-analysis) was alien to him. His way was to act—to quickly consult his own interior, utterly mysterious workings, and then act. Of them all, he had been the most perfectly made, a man whose deeply romantic core was encased in a brutally simple box which consisted of instinct and pragmatism. He took one of those quick looks inside now and decided to tell her everything. There was something wrong with him, oh yes. Yes indeed.

Something wrong with his mind, something as simple as his nature and as strange as the weird, wandering life into which that nature had impelled him.

He opened his mouth to say I'll tell you what's wrong, Susannah, and I'll do it in just three words. I'm going insane. But before he could begin, another tree fell in the forest—it went with a huge, grinding crash. This treefall was closer, and this time they were not deeply engaged in a test of wills masquerading as a lesson. Both heard it, both heard the agitated cawing of the crows which followed it, and both registered the fact that the tree had fallen close to their camp.

Susannah had looked in the direction of the sound but now her eyes, wide and dismayed, returned to the gunslinger's face. "Eddie!" she said.

A cry rose from the deep green fastness of the woods in back of them—a vast cry of rage. Another tree went, and then another. They fell in what sounded like a hail of mortar-fins, Dry wood, the gunslinger thought. Dead trees.

"Eddie!" This time she screamed it. "Whatever it is, it's near Eddie!" Her hands flew to the wheels of her chair and began the laborious job of turning it

around.

"No time for that." Roland seized her under her arms and pulled her free. He had carried her before when the going was too rough for her wheelchair—both men had—but she was still amazed by his uncanny, ruthless speed. At one moment she was in her wheelchair, an item which had been purchased in New York City's finest medical supply house in the fall of 1962. At the next she was balanced precariously on Roland's shoulders like a cheerleader, her muscular thighs gripping the sides of his neck, his palms over his head and pressing into the small of her back. He began to run with her, his sprung boots slapping the needle-strewn earth between the ruts left by her wheelchair.

"Odetta!" he cried, reverting in this moment of stress to the name by which he had first known her. "Don't lose the gun! For your father's sake!"

He was sprinting between the trees now. Shadow-lace and bright chains of sun-dapple ran across them in moving mosaics as Roland length-ened his stride. They were going downhill now. Susannah raised her left hand to ward off a branch that wanted to slap her from the gunslinger's shoulders. At the same moment she dropped her right hand to the butt of his ancient revolver, cradling it.

A mile, she thought. How long to run a mile? How long with him going flat-out like this? Not long, if he can keep his feet on these slippery needles . . . but maybe too long. Let him be all right, Lord—let my Eddie be all right.

As if in answer, she heard the unseen beast loose its cry again. That vast voice was like thunder. Like doom.

2

HE WAS THE LARGEST creature in the forest which had once been known as the Great West Woods, and he was the oldest. Many of the huge old elms which Roland had noticed in the valley below had been little more than twigs sprouting from the ground when the bear came out of the dim unknown reaches of Out-World like a brutal, wandering king.

Once, the Old People had lived in the West Woods (it was their leavings which Roland had found from time to time during the last weeks), and they had gone in fear of the colossal, undying bear. They had tried to kill him when they first discovered they were not alone in the new territory to which they had come, but although their arrows enraged him, they did no serious damage. And he was not confused about the source of his torment, as were the other beasts of the forest— even the predatory bushcats which denned and littered in the sandhills to the west. No; he knew where the arrows came from, this bear. Knew. And for every arrow which found its mark in the flesh below his shaggy pelt, he took three, four, perhaps as many as half a dozen of the Old People. Children if he could get them; women if he could not. Their warriors he disdained, and this was the final humiliation.

Eventually, as his real nature became clear to them, their efforts to kill him ceased. He was, of course, a demon incarnate—or the shadow of a god. They called him Mir, which to these people meant "the world beneath the world." He stood seventy feet high, and after eighteen or more centuries of undisputed rule in the West Woods, he was dying. Perhaps the instrument of his death had at first been a microscopic organism in something he had eaten or drunk; perhaps it was old age; more likely a combination of both. The cause didn't matter; the ultimate result—a rapidly multiplying colony of parasites foraging within his



fabu-lous brain—did. After years of calculating, brutal sanity, Mir had run mad. The bear had known men were in his woods again; he ruled the forest and although it was vast, nothing of importance which happened there escaped his attention for long. He had drawn away from the new-comers, not because he was afraid but because he had no business with them, nor they with him. Then the parasites had begun their work, and as his madness increased he became sure that it was the Old People again, that the trap-setters and forest-burners had returned and would soon set about their old, stupid mischief once more. Only as he lay in his final den some thirty miles from the place of the newcomers, sicker with each day's dawning than he had been at sunset the night before, had he come to believe that the Old People had finally found some mischief which worked: poison.

He came this time not to take revenge for some petty wound but to stamp them out entirely before their poison could finish having its way with him . . . and as he travelled, all thought ceased. What was left was red rage, the rusty buzz of the thing on top of his head—the turning thing between his ears which had once done its work in smooth silence— and an eerily enhanced sense of smell which led him unerringly toward the camp of the three pilgrims.

The bear, whose real name was not Mir but something else entirely, made his way through the forest like a moving building, a shaggy tower with reddish-brown eyes. Those eyes glowed with fever and madness.

His huge head, now wearing a garland of broken brunches and fir-needles, swung ceaselessly from side to side. Every now and then he would sneeze in a muffled explosion of sound—Ali-CHOW!—and clouds of squirming white parasites would be discharged from his dripping nos-trils. His paws, armed with curved talons three feet in length, tore at the trees. He walked upright, sinking deep tracks in the soft black soil under the trees. He reeked of fresh balsam and old, sour shit.

The thing on top of his head whirred and squealed, squealed and whirred.

The course of the bear remained almost constant: a straight line which would lead him to the camp of those who had dared return to his forest, who had dared fill his head with dark green agony. Old People or New People, they would die.

When he came to a dead tree, he some-times left the straight path long enough to push it down. The dry, explo-sive roar of its fall pleased him; when the tree had finally collapsed its rotten length on the forest floor or come to rest against one of its mates, the bear would push on through slanting bars of sunlight turned misty with floating motes of sawdust.

3

Two DAYS BEFORE, EDDIE Dean had begun carving again—the first time he'd tried to carve anything since the age of twelve. He remembered that he had enjoyed doing it, and he believed he must have been good at it, as well. He couldn't remember that part, not for sure, but there was at least one clear indication that it was so: Henry, his older brother, had hated to see him doing it.

Oh lookit the sissy, Henry would say. Watcha makin today, sissy? A dollhouse? A pisspot for your itty-bitty teeny peenie? Ohhh . . . ain't that CUTE?

Henry would never come right out and tell Eddie not to do some-thing; would never just walk up to him and say, would you mind quitting that, bro? See, it's pretty good, and when you do something that's pretty good, it makes me nervous. Because, you see, I'm the one that's supposed to be pretty good at stuff around

here. Me. Henry Dean. So what I think I'll do, brother o' mine, is just sort of rag on you about certain things. I won't come right out and say, "Don't do that, it's makin me nervous," because that might make me sound, you know, a little fucked up in the head. But I can rag on you, because that's part of what big brothers do, right? All part of the image. I'll rag on you and tease you and make fun of you until you just . . . fucking . . . QUIT IT! Okay?

Well, it wasn't okay, not really, but in the Dean household, things usually went the way Henry wanted them to go. And until very recently, that had seemed right—not okay but right. There was a small but crucial difference there, if you could but dig it. There were two reasons why it seemed right. One was an on-top reason; the other was an underneath reason.

The on-top reason was because Henry had to Watch Out for Eddie when Mrs. Dean was at work. He had to Watch Out all the time, because once there had been a Dean sister, if you could but dig it. She would have been four years older than Eddie and four years younger than Henry if she had lived, but that was the thing, you see, because she hadn't lived. She had been run over by a drunk driver when Eddie was two. She had been watching a game of hopscotch on the sidewalk when it happened.

As a lad, Eddie had sometimes thought of his sister while listening to Mel Alien doing the play-by-play on The Yankee Baseball Network. Someone would really pound one and Mel would bellow, "Holy cow, he got all of that one! SEEYA LATER!"

Well, the drunk had gotten all of Gloria Dean, holy cow, seeya later. Gloria was now in that great upper deck in the sky, and it had not happened because she was unlucky or because the State of New York had decided not to jerk the jerk's license after his third OUI or even because God had bent down to pick up a peanut; it had happened (as Mrs. Dean frequently told her sons) because there had been no one around to Watch Out for Gloria.

Henry's job was to make sure nothing like that ever happened to Eddie. That was his job and he did it, but it wasn't easy. Henry and Mrs. Dean agreed on that, if nothing else. Both of them frequently reminded Eddie of just how much Henry had sacrificed to keep Eddie safe from drunk drivers and muggers and junkies and possibly even malevolent aliens who might be cruising around in the general vicinity of the upper deck, aliens who might decide to come down from their UFOs on nuclear-powered jet-skis at any time in order to kidnap little kids like Eddie Dean. So it was wrong to make Henry more nervous than this terrible responsibility had already made him. If Eddie was doing something that did make Henry more nervous, Eddie ought to cease doing that thing immediately. It was a way of paying Henry back for all the time Henry had spent Watching Out for Eddie. When you thought about it that way, you saw that doing things better than Henry could do them was very unfair.

Then there was the underneath reason. That reason (the world beneath the world, one might say) was more powerful, because it could never be stated: Eddie could not allow himself to be better than Henry at much of anything, because Henry was, for the most part, good for nothing . . . except Watching Out for Eddie, of course.

Henry taught Eddie how to play basketball in the playground near the apartment building where they lived—this was in a cement suburb where the towers of Manhattan stood against the horizon like a dream and the welfare check was king.

Eddie was eight years younger than Henry and much smaller, but he was also much faster. He had a natural feel for the game; once he got on the cracked, hilly cement of the court with the ball in his hands, the moves seemed to sizzle in his nerve-endings. He was faster, but that was no big deal. The big deal was this: he was better than Henry. If he hadn't known it from the results of the pick-up games in which they sometimes played, he would have known it from Henry's thunderous looks and the hard punches to the upper arm Henry often dealt out on their way home afterwards. These punches were supposedly Henry's little jokes—"Two for flinching!" Henry would cry cheerily, and then whap-whap! Into Eddie's bicep with one knuckle extended—but they didn't feel like jokes. They felt like warnings. They felt like Henry's way of saying You better not fake me out and make me look stupid when you drive for the basket, bro; you better remember that I'm Watching Out for You.

The same was true with reading . . . baseball . . . Ring-a-Levio . . . math . . . even jump-rope, which was a girl's game. That he was better at these things, or could be better, was a secret that had to be kept at all costs. Because Eddie was the younger brother. Because Henry was Watching Out for him. But the most important part of the underneath reason was also the simplest: these things had to be kept secret because Henry was Eddie's big brother, and Eddie adored him.

4

Two DAYS AGO, WHILE Susannah was skinning out a rabbit and Roland was starting supper, Eddie had been in the forest just south of camp. He had seen a funny spur of wood jutting out of a fresh stump. A weird, feeling—he supposed it was the one people called *deja vu*—swept over him, and he found himself staring fixedly at the spur, which looked like a badly shaped doorknob. He was distantly aware that his mouth had gone dry.

After several seconds, he realized he was looking at the spur sticking out of the stump but thinking about the courtyard behind the building where he and Henry had lived—thinking about the feel of the warm cement under his ass and the whopping smells of garbage from the dumpster around the corner in the alley. In this memory he had a chunk of wood in his left hand and a paring knife from the drawer by the sink in his right. The chunk of wood jutting from the stump had called up the memory of that brief period when he had fallen violently in love with wood-carving. It was just that the memory was buried so deep he hadn't realized, at first, what it was.

What he had loved most about carving was the seeing part, which happened even before you began. Sometimes you saw a car or a truck. Sometimes a dog or cat. Once, he remembered, it had been the face of an idol—one of the spooky Easter Island monoliths he had seen in an issue of *National Geographic* at school. That had turned out to be a good one. The game was to find out how much of that thing you could get out of the wood without breaking it. You could never get it all, but if you were very careful, you could sometimes get quite a lot.

There was something inside the boss on the side of the stump. He thought he might be able to release quite a lot of it with Roland's knife—it was the sharpest, handiest tool he had ever used.

Something inside the wood, waiting patiently for someone—someone like him!—to come along and let it out. To set it free.

Oh lookit the sissy! Whatcha makin today, sissy? A dollhouse? A pisspot for your

itty-bitty teeny peenie? A slingshot, so you can pretend to hunt rabbits, just like the big boys? Awwww . . . ain't that CUTE?

He felt a burst of shame, a sense of wrongness; that strong sense of secrets that must be kept at any cost, and then he remembered—again— that Henry Dean, who had in his later years become the great sage and eminent junkie, was dead. This realization had still not lost its power to surprise; it kept hitting him in different ways, sometimes with sorrow, sometimes with guilt, sometimes with anger. On this day, two days before the great bear came charging out of the green corridors of the woods, it had hit him in the most surprising way of all. He had felt relief, and a soaring joy.

He was free.

Eddie had borrowed Roland's knife. He used it to cut carefully around the jutting boss of wood, then brought it back and sat beneath a tree with it, turning it this way and that. He was not looking at it; he was looking into it. Susannah had finished with her rabbit. The meat went into the pot over the fire; the skin she stretched between two sticks, tying it with hanks of rawhide from Roland's purse. Later on, after the evening meal, Eddie would begin scraping it clean. She used her hands and arms, slipping effortlessly over to where Eddie was sitting with his back propped against the tall old pine. At the campfire, Roland was crumbling some arcane—and no doubt delicious—woods-herb into the pot. "What's doing, Eddie?"

Eddie had found himself restraining an absurd urge to hide the boss of wood behind his back. "Nothing," he said. "Thought I might, you know, curve something." He paused, then added: "I'm not very good, though." He sounded as if he might be trying to reassure her of this fact.

She had looked at him, puzzled. For a moment she seemed on the verge of saying something, then simply shrugged and left him alone. She had no idea why Eddie seemed ashamed to be passing a little time in whittling—her father had done it all the time—but if it was something that needed to be talked about, she supposed Eddie would get to it in his own time.

He knew the guilty feelings were stupid and pointless, but he also knew he felt more comfortable doing this work when Roland and Susan-nah were out of camp. Old habits, it seemed, sometimes died hard. Beating heroin was child's play compared to beating your childhood.

When they were away, hunting or shooting or keeping Roland's peculiar form of school, Eddie found himself able to turn to his piece of wood with surprising skill and increasing pleasure. The shape was in there, all right; he had been right about that. It was a simple one, and Roland's knife was setting it free with an eerie ease. Eddie thought he was going to get almost all of it, and that meant the slingshot might actually turn out to be a practical weapon. Not much compared to Roland's big revolvers, maybe, but something he had made himself, just the same. His. And this idea pleased him very much.

When the first crows rose in the air, cawing affrightedly, he did not hear. He was already thinking—hoping—that he might see a tree with a bow trapped in it before too long.

5  
HE HEARD THE BEAR approaching before Roland and Susannah did, but not much before—he was lost in that high daze of concentration which accompanies the

creative impulse at its sweetest and most powerful. He had suppressed these impulses for most of his life, and now this one held him wholly in its grip.

Eddie was a willing prisoner.

He was pulled from his daze not by the sound of falling trees but by the rapid thunder of a .45 from the south. He looked up, smiling, and brushed hair from his forehead with a sawdusty hand. In that moment, sitting with his back against a tall pine in the clearing which had become home, his face crisscrossed with opposing beams of green-gold forest light, he looked handsome indeed—a young man with unruly dark hair which constantly tried to spill across his high forehead, a young man with a strong, mobile mouth and hazel eyes.

For a moment his eyes shifted to Roland's other gun, hanging by its belt from a nearby branch, and he found himself wondering how long it had been since Roland had gone anywhere without at least one of his fabulous weapons hanging by his side. That question led to two others.

How old was he, this man who had plucked Eddie and Susannah from their world and their whens? And, more important, what was wrong with him?

Susannah had promised to broach that subject ... if she shot well and didn't get Roland's back hair up, that was. Eddie didn't think Roland would tell her—not at first—but it was time to let old long tall and ugly know that they knew something was wrong.

"There'll be water if God wills it," Eddie said. He turned back to his carving with a little smile playing on his lips. They had both begun to pick up Roland's little sayings . . . and he theirs. It was almost as if they were halves of die same—

Then a tree fell close by in the forest, and Eddie was on his feet in a second, the half-carved slingshot in one hand, Roland's knife in the other. He stared across the clearing in the direction of die sound, heart thumping, all his senses finally alert. Something was coming. Now he could hear it, trampling its heedless way through the underbrush, and he marvelled bitterly that this realization had come so late. Far back in his mind, a small voice told him this was what he got. This was what he got for doing something better than Henry, for making Henry nervous.

Another tree fell with a ratcheting, coughing crash. Looking down a ragged aisle between the tall firs, Eddie saw a cloud of sawdust rise in the still air. The creature responsible for that cloud suddenly bellowed—a raging, gut-freezing sound.

It was one huge motherfucker, whatever it was.

He dropped the chunk of wood, then flipped Roland's knife at a tree fifteen feet to his left. It somersaulted twice in the air and then stuck halfway to the hilt in the wood, quivering. He grabbed Roland's .45 from the place where it hung and cocked it.

Stand or run?

But he discovered he no longer had the luxury of that question. The thing was fast as well as huge, and it was now too late to run. A gigantic shape began to disclose itself in that aisle of trees north of the clearing, a shape which towered above all but the tallest trees. It was lumbering directly toward him, and as its eyes fixed upon Eddie Dean, it gave voice to another of those cries.

"Oh man, I'm fucked," Eddie whispered as another tree bent, cracked like a mortar, then crashed to the forest floor in a cloud of dust and dead needles.

Now it was lumbering straight toward the clearing where he stood, a bear the size of King Kong. Its footfalls made the ground shake.

What will you do, Eddie? Roland suddenly asked. Think! It's the only advantage you have over yon beast. What will you do?

He didn't think he could kill it. Maybe with a bazooka, but probably not with the gunslinger's .45. He could run, but had an idea that the oncoming beast might be pretty fast when it wanted to be. He guessed the chances of ending up as jam between the great bear's toes might be as high as fifty-fifty.

So which one was it going to be? Stand here and start shooting or run like his hair was on fire and his ass was catching?

It occurred to him that there was a third choice. He could climb.

He turned toward the tree against which he had been leaning. It was a huge, hoary pine, easily the tallest tree in this part of the woods. The first branch spread out over the forest floor in a feathery green fan about eight feet up.

Eddie dropped the revolver's hammer and then jammed the gun into the waistband of his pants. He leaped for the branch, grabbed it, and did a frantic chin-up.

Behind him, the bear gave voice to another bellow as it burst into the clearing.

The bear would have had him just the same, would have left Eddie Dean's guts hanging in gaudy strings from the lowest branches of the pine, if another of those sneezing fits had not come on it at that moment. It kicked the ashy remains of the campfire into a black cloud and then stood almost doubled over, huge front paws on its huge thighs, looking for a moment like an old man in a fur coat, an old man with a cold. It sneezed again and again—AH-CHOW! AH-CHOW! AH-CHOW!—and clouds of parasites blew out of its muzzle. Hot urine flowed in a stream between its legs and hissed out the campfire's scattered embers.

Eddie did not waste the few crucial extra moments he had been given. He went up the tree like a monkey on a stick, pausing only once to make sure the gunslinger's revolver was still seated firmly in the waist-band of his pants. He was in terror, already half convinced that he was going to die (what else could he expect, now that Henry wasn't around to Watch Out for him?), but a crazy laughter raved through his head just the same. Been treed, he thought. How bout that, sports fans? Been treed by Bearzilla.

The creature raised its head again, the thing turning between its ears catching winks and flashes of sunlight as it did so, then charged Eddie's tree. It reached high with one paw and slashed forward, meaning to knock Eddie loose like a pinecone. The paw tore through the branch he was standing on just as he lunged upward to the next. That paw tore through one of his shoes as well, pulling it from his foot and sending it flying in two ragged pieces.

That's okay, Eddie thought. You can have em both, Br'er Bear, if you want.

Goddam things were worn out, anyway.

The bear roared and lashed at the tree, cutting deep wounds in its ancient bark, wounds which bled clear, resinous sap. Eddie kept on yanking himself up. The branches were thinning now, and when he risked a glance down he stared directly into the bear's muddy eyes. Below its cocked head, the clearing had become a target with the scattered smudge of campfire as its bullseye.

"Missed me, you hairy motherf—" Eddie began, and then the bear, its head still cocked back to look at him, sneezed. Eddie was immediately drenched in hot snot that was filled with thousands of small white worms. They wriggled frantically on his shirt, his forearms, his throat and face.

Eddie screamed in mingled surprise and revulsion. He began to brush at his eyes and mouth, lost his balance, and just managed to hook an arm around the branch beside him in time. He held on and raked at his skin, wiping off as much of the wormy phlegm as he could. The bear roared and hit the tree again. The pine rocked like a mast in a gale . . . but the fresh claw-marks which appeared were at least seven feet below the branch on which Eddie's feet were planted.

The worms were dying, he realized—must have begun dying as soon as they left the infected swamps inside the monster's body. It made him feel a little better, and he began to climb again. He stopped twelve feet further up, daring to go no higher. The trunk of the pine, easily eight feet in diameter at its base, was now no more than eighteen inches through the middle. He had distributed his weight on two branches, but he could feel both of them bending springily beneath him. He had a crow's nest view of the forest and foothills to the west now, spread out below him in an undulating carpet. Under other circumstances, it would have been a view to relish.

Top of the world, Ma, he thought. He looked down into the bear's upturned face again, and for a moment all-coherent thought was driven from his mind by simple amazement.

There was something growing out of the bear's skull, and to Eddie it looked like a small radar-dish.

The gadget turned jerkily, kicking up flashes of sun as it did, and Eddie could hear it screaming thinly. He had owned a few old cars in his time—the kind that sat in the used-car lots with the words HANDYMAN'S SPECIAL soaped on the windshields—and he thought the sound coming from that gadget was the sound of bearings which will freeze up if they are not replaced soon.

The bear uttered a long, purring growl. Yellowish foam, thick with worms, squeezed between its paws in curdled gobbets. If he had never looked into the face of utter lunacy (and he supposed he had, having been eyeball to eyeball with that world-class bitch Detta Walker on more than one occasion), Eddie was looking into it now . . . but that face was, thankfully, a good thirty feet below him, and at their highest reach those killing talons were fifteen feet under the soles of his feet. And, unlike the trees upon which the bear had vented its spleen as it approached the clearing, this one was not dead.

"Mexican standoff, honey, Eddie panted. He wiped sweat from his forehead with one sap-sticky hand and flicked the mess down into the bugbear's face.

Then the creature the Old People had called Mir embraced the tree with its great forepaws and began to shake it. Eddie grabbed the trunk and held on for dear life; eyes squeezed into grim slits, as the pine began to sway back and forth like a pendulum.

6  
ROLAND HALTED AT THE EDGE of the clearing. Susannah, perched on his shoulders, stared unbelievably across the open space. The creature stood at the base of the tree where Eddie had been when the two of them left the clearing forty-five minutes ago. She could see only chunks and sections of its body through the screen of branches and dark green needles. Roland's other gunbelt lay beside one of the monster's feet. The holster, she saw, was empty.

"My God," she murmured.

The bear screamed like a distraught woman and began shaking the tree. The

branches lashed as if in a high wind. Her eyes skated upward and she saw a dark form near the top. Eddie was hugging the trunk as the tree rocked and rolled. As she watched, one of his hands slipped and flailed wildly for purchase.

"What do we do?" she screamed down at Roland. "It's goan shake him loose! What do we do?"

Roland tried to think about it, but that queer sensation had returned again—it was always with him now, but stress seemed to make it worse. He felt like two men existing inside one skull. Each man had his own set of memories, and when they began to argue, each insisting that his memories were the true ones, the gunslinger felt as if he were being ripped in two. He made a desperate effort to reconcile these two halves and succeeded ... at least for the moment.

"It's one of the Twelve!" he shouted. "One of the Guardians! Must be! But I thought they were—"

The bear bellowed up at Eddie again. Now it began to slap at the tree like a punchy fighter. Branches snapped and fell around its feet in a tangle.

"What?" Susannah screamed. "What's the rest?"

Roland closed his eyes. Inside his head, a voice shouted, The boy's name was Jake! Another voice shouted back, There WAS no boy! There WAS no boy, and you know it!

Get away, both of you! he snarled, and then called out aloud: "Shoot it! Shoot it in the ass, Susannah! It'll turn and charge! When it does, look for something on its head! It—"

The bear squalled again. It gave up slapping the tree and went back to shaking it. Ominous popping, grinding sounds were now coming from the upper part of the trunk.

When he could be heard again, Roland shouted: "I think it looks like a hat! A little steel hat! Shoot it, Susannah! And don't miss!"

Terror suddenly filled her—terror and another emotion, one she would never have expected: crushing loneliness.

"No! I'll miss! You do it, Roland!" She began to fumble his revolver out of the belt she wore, meaning to give it to him.

"Can't!" Roland shouted. "The angle's bad! You have to do it, Susan-nah! This is the real test, and you'd better pass it!"

"Roland—"

"It means to snap the top of the tree off!" he roared at her. "Can't you see that?"

She looked at the revolver in her hand. Looked across the clearing, at the gigantic bear obscured in the clouds and sprays of green needles. Looked at Eddie, swaying back and forth like a metronome. Eddie probably had Roland's other gun, but Susannah could see no way he could use it without being shaken from his perch like an over-ripe plum. Also, he might not shoot at the right thing.

She raised the revolver. Her stomach was thick with dread. "Hold me still, Roland," she said. "If you don't—"

"Don't worry about me!"

She fired twice, squeezing the shots as Roland had taught her. The heavy reports cut across the sound of the bear shaking the tree like the cracks of a bullwhip. She saw both bullets strike home in the left cheek of the bear's rump, less than two inches apart.



It shrieked in surprise, pain, and outrage. One of its huge front paws came out of the dense screen of branches and needles and slapped at the hurt place. The hand came away dripping scarlet and rose back out of sight. Susannah could imagine it up there, examining its bloody palm. Then there was a rushing, rustling, snapping sound as the bear turned, bending down at the same time, dropping to all fours in order to achieve maximum speed. For the first time she saw its face, and her heart quailed. Its muzzle was lathered with foam; its huge eyes glared like lamps. Its shaggy head swung to the left . . . back to the right . . . and centered upon Roland, who stood with his legs apart and Susannah Dean balanced on his shoulders.

With a shattering roar, the bear charged.

7

SAY YOUR LESSON, Susannah Dean, and be true.

The bear came at them in a rumbling lope; it was like watching a runaway factory machine over which someone had thrown a huge, moth-eaten rug.

It looks like a hat! A little steel hat!

She saw it ... but it didn't look like a hat to her. It looked like a radar-dish—a much smaller version of the kind she had seen in Movie Tone newsreel stories about how the DEW-line was keeping everyone safe from a Russian sneak attack. It was bigger than the pebbles she had shot off the boulder earlier, but the distance was greater. Sun and shadow ran across it in deceiving dapples.

I do not aim with my hand; she who aims with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

I can't do it!

I do not shoot with my hand; she who shoots with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

I'll miss! I know I'll miss!

I do not kill with my gun; she who kills with her gun—

"Shoot it!" Roland roared. "Susannah, shoot it!"

With the trigger as yet unpulled, she saw the bullet go home, guided from muzzle to target by nothing more or less than her heart's fierce desire that it should fly true. All fear fell away. What was left was a feeling of deep coldness and she had time to think: This is what he feels. My God—how does he stand it? "I kill with my heart, motherfucker," she said, and the gunslinger's revolver roared in her hand.

8

THE SILVERY THING SPUN on a steel rod planted in the bear's skull. Susannah's bullet struck it dead center and the radar-dish blew into a hundred glittering fragments. The pole itself was suddenly engulfed in a burst of crackling blue fire which reached out in a net and seemed to grasp the sides of the bear's face for a moment.

It rose on its rear legs with a whistling howl of agony, its front paws boxing aimlessly at the air. It turned in a wide, staggering circle and began to flap its arms, as if it had decided to fly away. It tried to roar again but what came out instead was a weird warbling sound like an air-raid siren.

"It is very well." Roland sounded exhausted. "A good shot, fair and true."

"Should I shoot it again?" she asked uncertainly. The bear was still blundering around in its mad circle but now its body had begun to tilt sideways and inwards. It struck a small tree, rebounded, almost fell over, and then began to circle again.

"No need," Roland said. She felt his hands grip her waist and lift her. A moment later she was sitting on the ground with her thighs folded beneath her. Eddie was slowly and shakily descending the pine, but she didn't see him. She could not take her eyes from the bear.

She had seen the whales at the Seaquarium near Mystic, Connecticut, and believed they had been bigger than this—much bigger, probably—but this was certainly the largest land creature she had ever seen. And it was clearly dying. Its roars had become liquid bubbling sounds, and although its eyes were open, it seemed blind. It flailed aimlessly about the camp, knocking over a rack of curing hides, stamping flat the little shelter she shared with Eddie, caroming off trees. She could see the steel post rising from its head. Tendrils of smoke were rising around it, as if her shot had ignited its brains.

Eddie reached the lowest branch of the tree which had saved his life and sat shakily astride it. "Holy Mary Mother of God, he said. "I'm looking right at it and I still don't believe—"

The bear wheeled back toward him. Eddie leaped nimbly from the tree and streaked toward Susannah and Roland. The bear took no notice, it marched drunkenly to the pine which had been Eddie's refuge, tried to grasp it, failed, and sank to its knees. Now they could hear other sounds coming from inside it, sounds that made Eddie think of some huge truck engine stripping its gears.

A spasm convulsed it, bowed its back. Its front claws rose and gored madly at its own face. Worm-infested blood flew and splattered. Then it fell over, making the ground tremble with its fall, and lay still. After all its strange centuries, the bear the Old People had called Mir—the world beneath the world—was dead.

9

EDDIE PICKED SUSANNAH UP, held her with his sticky hands locked together at the small of her back, and kissed her deeply. He reeked of sweat and pine-tar. She touched his cheeks, his neck; she ran her hands through his wet hair. She felt an insane urge to touch him everywhere until she was absolutely sure of his reality.

"It almost had me," he said. "It was like being on some crazy carnival ride. What a shot! Jesus, Suze—what a shot!"

"I hope I never have to do anything like that again," she said . . .but a small voice at the center of her demurred. That voice suggested that she could not wait to do something like that again. And it was cold, that voice. Cold.

"What was—" he began, turning toward Roland, but Roland was no longer standing there. He was walking slowly toward the bear, which now lay on the ground with its shaggy knees up. From within it came a series of muffled gasps and gurgles as its strange guts continued to slowly run down.

Roland saw his knife planted deep in a tree near the scarred veteran that had saved Eddie's life. He pulled it free and wiped it clean on the soft deerskin

shirt which had replaced the tatters he had been wearing when the three of them had left the beach. He stood by the bear, looking down at it with an expression of pity and wonder.

Hello, stranger, he thought. Hello, old friend. I never believed in you, not really. I believe Alain did, and I know that Cuthbert did— Cuthbert believed in everything—but I was the hardheaded one. I thought you were only a tale for children . . . another wind which blew around in my old nurse's hollow head before finally escaping her jab-bering mouth. But you were here all along, another refugee of the old times, like the pump at the way station and the old machines under the mountains. Are the Slow Mutants who worshipped those broken remnants the final descendents of the people who once lived in this forest and finally fled your wrath? I don't know, will never know . . . but it feels right. Yes. And then I came with my friends—my deadly new friends, who are becoming so much like my deadly old friends. We came, weaving our magic circle around us and around everything we touch, strand by poi-sonous strand, and now here you lie, at our feet. The world has moved on again, and this time, old friend, it's you who have been left behind.

The monster's body still radiated a deep, sick heat. Parasites were leaving its mouth and tattered nostrils in hordes, but they died almost at once. Waxy-white piles of them were growing on either side of the bear's head.

Eddie approached slowly. He had shifted Susannah over to one hip, carrying her as a mother might carry a baby. "What was it, Roland? Do you know?"

"He called it a Guardian, I think," Susannah said.

"Yes." Roland's voice was slow with amazement. "I thought they were all gone, must all be gone ... if they ever existed outside of the old wives' tales in the first place."

"Whatever it was, it was one crazy mother," Eddie said.

Roland smiled a little. "If you'd lived two or three thousand years, you'd be one crazy mother, too."

"Two or three thousand . . . Christ!"

Susannah said, "Is it a bear? Really? And what's that?" She was pointing at what appeared to be a square metal tag set high on one of the bear's thick rear legs.

It was almost overgrown with tough tangles of hair, but the afternoon sun had pricked out a single starpoint of light on its stainless steel surface, revealing it.

Eddie knelt and reached hesitantly toward the tag, aware that strange muffled clicks and clacks were still coming from deep inside the fallen giant. He looked at Roland.

"Go ahead," the gunslinger told him. "It's finished."

Eddie pushed a clump of hair aside and leaned closer. Words had been stamped into the metal. They were quite badly eroded, but he found that with a little effort he could read them.

NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS, LTD.

Granite City Northeast Corridor

Design 4 GUARDIAN

Serial # AA 24123 CX 755431297 L 14

Type/Species BEAR

SHARDIK

"Holy Jesus, this thing is a robot," Eddie said softly.

"It can't be," Susannah said. "When I shot it, it bled."

"Maybe so, but your ordinary, garden-variety bear doesn't have a radar-dish growing out of its head. And, so far as I know, your ordinary, garden-variety bear doesn't live to be two or three th—" He broke off suddenly, looking at Roland. When he spoke again, his voice was revolted. "Roland, what are you doing?"

Roland did not reply; did not need to reply. What he was doing— gouging out one of the bear's eyes with his knife—was perfectly obvious. The surgery was quick, neat, and precise. When it was completed he balanced an oozing brown ball of jelly on the blade of his knife for a moment and then flicked it aside. A few more worms made their way out of the staring hole, tried to squirm their way down the bear's muzzle, and died.

The gunslinger leaned over the eyesocket of Shardik, the great Guardian bear, and peered inside. "Come and look, both of you," he said. "I'll show you a wonder of the latter days."

"Put me down, Eddie," Susannah said.

He did so, and she moved swiftly on her hands and upper thighs to where the gunslinger was hunkered down over the bear's wide, slack face. Eddie joined them, looking between their shoulders. The three of them gazed in rapt silence for nearly a full minute; the only noise came from the crows which still circled and scolded in the sky.

Blood oozed from the socket in a few thick, dying trickles. Yet it was not just blood, Eddie saw. There was also a clear fluid which gave off an identifiable scent—bananas. And, embedded in the delicate criss-cross of tendons which shaped the socket, he saw a webwork of what looked like strings. Beyond them, at the back of the socket, was a red spark, blinking on and off. It illuminated a tiny square board marked with silvery squiggles of what could only be solder.

"It isn't a bear, it's a fucking Sony Walkman," he muttered.

Susannah looked around at him. "What?"

"Nothing." Eddie glanced at Roland. "Do you think it's safe to reach in?"

Roland shrugged. "I think so. If there was a demon in this creature, it's fled." Eddie reached in with his little finger; nerves set to draw back if he felt even a tickle of electricity. He touched the cooling meat inside the eyesocket, which was nearly the size of a baseball, and then one of those strings. Except it wasn't a string; it was a gossamer-thin strand of steel. He withdrew his finger and saw the tiny red spark blink once more before going out forever.

"Shardik," Eddie murmured. "I know that name, but I can't place it. Does it mean anything to you, Suze?"

She shook her head.

"The thing is . . ." Eddie laughed helplessly. "I associate it with rabbits. Isn't that nuts?"

Roland stood up. His knees popped like gunshots. "We'll have to move camp," he said. "The ground here is spoiled. The other clearing, the one where we go to shoot, will—"

He took two trembling steps and then collapsed to his knees, palms pressed to the sides of his sagging head.

10

EDDIE AND SUSANNAH EXCHANGED a single frightened glance and then Eddie leaped to Roland's side. "What is it? Roland, what's wrong?"

"There was a boy," the gunslinger said in a distant, muttering voice. And then, in the very next breath, "There wasn't a boy."

"Roland?" Susannah asked. She came to him, slipped an arm around his shoulders, felt him trembling. "Roland, what is it?"

"The boy," Roland said, looking at her with floating, dazed eyes. "It's the boy. Always the boy."

"What boy?" Eddie yelled frantically. "What boy?"

"Go then," Roland said, "there are other worlds than these." And fainted.

11

THAT NIGHT THE THREE of them sat around a huge bonfire Eddie and Susannah had built in the clearing Eddie called "the shooting gallery." It would have been a bad place to camp in the wintertime, open to the valley as it was, but for now it was fine. Eddie guessed that here in Roland's world it was still late summer. The black vault of the sky arched overhead, speckled by what seemed to be whole galaxies. Almost straight ahead to the south, across the river of darkness that was the valley, Eddie could see Old Mother rising above the distant, unseen horizon. He glanced at Roland, who sat huddled by the fire with three skins wrapped around his shoulders despite the warmth of the night and the heat of the fire. There was an untouched plate of food by his side and a bone cradled in his hands. Eddie glanced back at the sky and thought of a story the gunslinger had told him and Susannah on one of the long days they had spent moving away from the beach, through the foothills, and finally into these deep woods where they had found a temporary refuge.

Before time began, Roland said, Old Star and Old Mother had been young and passionate newlyweds. Then one day there had been a terrible argument. Old Mother (who in those long-ago days had been known by her real name, which was Lydia) had caught Old Star (whose real name was Apon) hanging about a beautiful young woman named Cassiopeia. They'd had a real bang-up fight, those two, a hair-pulling, eye-gouging, crockery-throwing fight. One of those thrown bits of crockery had become the earth; a smaller shard the moon, a coal from their kitchen stove had become the sun. In the end, the gods had stepped in so Apon and Lydia might not, in their anger, destroy the universe before it was fairly begun. Cassiopeia, the saucy jade who caused the trouble in the first place ("Yeah, right—it's always the woman," Susannah had said at this point), had been banished to a rocking-chair made of stars forever and ever. Yet not even this had solved the problem. Lydia had been willing to try again, but Apon was stiffnecked and full of pride ("Yeah, always blame the man," Eddie had grunted at this point). So they had parted, and now they look at each other in mingled hatred and longing from across the star-strewn wreckage of their divorce. Apon and Lydia are three billion years gone, the gunslinger told them; they have become Old Star and Old Mother, the north and south, each pining for the other but both now too proud to beg for reconciliation . . . and Cassiopeia sits off

to the side in her chair, rocking and laughing at them both.

Eddie was startled by a soft touch on his arm. It was Susannah. "Come on," she said. "We've got to make him talk."

Eddie carried her to the campfire and put her down carefully on Roland's right side. He sat on Roland's left. Roland looked first at Susannah, then at Eddie.

"How close you both sit to me," he remarked. "Like lovers ... or warders in a gaol."

"It's time for you to do some talking." Susannah's voice was low, clear, and musical. "If we're your companions, Roland—and it seems like we are, like it or not—it's time you started treating us as companions. Tell us what's wrong ..."

"... and what we can do about it," Eddie finished.

Roland sighed deeply. "I don't know how to begin," he said. "It's been so long since I've had companions ... or a tale to tell ..."

"Start with the bear," Eddie said.

Susannah leaned forward and touched the jawbone Roland held in his hands. It frightened her, but she touched it anyway. "And finish with this."

"Yes." Roland lifted the bone to eye-level and looked at it for a moment before dropping it back into his lap. "We'll have to speak of this, won't we? It's the center of the thing."

But the bear came first.

12

"THIS IS THE STORY I was told when I was a child," Roland said. "When everything was new, the Great Old Ones—they weren't gods, but people who had almost the knowledge of gods—created Twelve Guardians to stand watch at the twelve portals which lead in and out of the world. Sometimes I heard that these portals were natural things, like the constellations we see in the sky or the bottomless crack in the earth we called Dragon's Grave, because of the great burst of steam they gave off every thirty or forty days. But other people—one I remember in particular, the head cook in my father's castle, a man named Hax—said they were not natural, that they had been created by the Great Old Ones themselves, in the days before they hanged themselves with pride like a noose and disappeared from the earth. Hax used to say that the creation of the Twelve Guardians was the last act of the Great Old Ones, their attempt to atone for the great wrongs they had done to each other, and to the earth itself."

"Portals," Eddie mused. "Doors, you mean. We're back to those again. Do these doors that lead in and out of the world open on the world Suze and I came from? Like the ones we found along the beach?"

"I don't know," Roland said. "For every thing I do know, there are a hundred things I don't. You—both of you—will have to reconcile yourselves to that fact. The world has moved on, we say. When it did, it went like a great receding wave, leaving only wreckage behind . . . wreckage that sometimes looks like a map."

"Well, make a guess!" Eddie exclaimed, and the raw eagerness in his voice told the gunslinger that Eddie had not given up the idea of returning to his own world—and Susannah's—even now. Not entirely.

"Leave him be, Eddie," Susannah said. "The man don't guess."

"Not true—sometimes the man does," Roland said, surprising them both. "When guessing's the only thing left, sometimes he does. The answer is no. I don't

think—I don't guess—that these portals are much like the doors on the beach. I don't guess they go to a where or when that we would recognize. I think the doors on the beach—the ones that led into the world you both came from—were like the pivot at the center of a child's teeterboard. Do you know what that is?"

"Seesaw?" Susannah asked, and tipped her hand back and forth to demonstrate.

"Yes!" Roland agreed, looking pleased. "Just so. On one end of this sawsee—"

"Seesaw," Eddie said, smiling a little.

"Yes. On one end, my ka. On the other, that of the man in black— Walter. The doors were the center, creations of the tension between two opposing destinies. These other portals are things far greater than Walter, or me, or the little fellowship we three have made."

"Are you saying," Susannah asked hesitantly, "that the portals where these Guardians stand watch are outside ka? Beyond ka?"

"I'm saying that I believe so." He offered his own brief smile, a thin sickle in the firelight. "That I guess so."

He was silent a moment, then he picked up a stick of his own. He brushed away the carpet of pine needles and used the stick to draw in the dirt beneath:

"Here is the world as I was told it existed when I was a child. The Xs are the portals standing in a ring at its eternal edge. If one drew six lines, connecting these portals in pairs—so—"

He looked up. "Do you see where the lines cross in the center?"

Eddie felt gooseflesh crawl up his back and down his arms. His mouth was suddenly dry. "Is that it, Roland? Is that—?"

Roland nodded. His long, lined face was grave. "At this nexus lies the Great Portal, the so-called Thirteenth Gate which rules not just this world but all worlds."

He tapped the center of the circle.

"Here is the Dark Tower for which I've searched my whole life."

13

THE GUNSLINGER RESUMED: "At each of the twelve lesser portals the Great Old Ones set a Guardian. In my childhood I could have named them all in the rimes my nursemaid—and Hax the cook—taught to me . . . but my childhood was long ago. There was the Bear, of course, and the Fish . . . the Lion . . . the Bat. And the Turtle—he was an important one . . ."

The gunslinger looked up into the starry sky, his brow creased in deep thought. Then an amazingly sunny smile broke across his features and he recited:

"See the TURTLE of enormous girth!

On his shell he holds the earth.

His thought is slow but always kind;

He holds us all within his mind.

On his back all vows are made;  
He sees the truth but mayn't aid.  
He loves the land and loves the sea,  
And even loves a child like me."

Roland uttered a small, bemused laugh. "Hax taught that to me, singing it as he stirred the frosting for some cake and gave me little nips of the sweet from the edge of his spoon. Amazing what we remember, isn't it? Anyway, as I grew older, I came to believe that the Guardians didn't really exist—that they were symbols rather than substance. It seems that I was wrong."

"I called it a robot," Eddie said, "but that's not what it really was."

Susannah's right—the only thing robots bleed when you shoot them is Quaker State 10-40. I think it was what people of my world call a cyborg, Roland—a creature that's part machine and part flesh and blood. There was a movie I saw . . . we told you about movies, didn't we?"

Smiling a little, Roland nodded.

"Well, this movie was called Robocop, and the guy in it wasn't a lot different from the bear Susannah killed. How did you know where she should shoot it?"

"That I remembered from the old tales as Hax told them," he said. "If it had been up to my nursemaid, Eddie, you'd be in the belly of the bear now. Do they sometimes tell puzzled children in your world to put on their thinking caps?"

"Yes," Susannah said. "They sure do."

"It's said here, as well, and the saying comes from the story of the Guardians. Each supposedly carried an extra brain on the outside of its head. In a hat." He looked at them with his dreadfully haunted eyes and smiled again. "It didn't look much like a hat, did it?"

"No," Eddie said, "but the story was close enough to save our bacon."

"I think now that I've been looking for one of the Guardians ever since I began my quest," Roland said. "When we find the portal this Shardik guarded—and that should only be a matter of following its back-trail—we will finally have a course to follow. We must set the portal to our backs and then simply move straight ahead. At the center of the circle . . . the Tower."

Eddie opened his mouth to say. All right, let's talk about this Tower. Finally, once and for all, let's talk about it—what it is, what it means, and, most important of all, what happens to us when we get there. But no sound came out, and after a moment he closed his mouth again. This wasn't the time—not now, with Roland in such obvious pain. Not now, with only the spark of their campfire to keep the night at bay.

"So now we come to the other part," Roland said heavily. "I have finally found my course—after all the long years I have found my course—but at the same time I seem to be losing my sanity. I can feel it crumbling away beneath my feet, like a steep embankment which has been loosened by rain. This is my punishment for letting a boy who never existed fall to his death. And that is also ka."

"Who is this boy, Roland?" Susannah asked.

Roland glanced at Eddie. "Do you know?"

Eddie shook his head.

"But I spoke of him," Roland said. "In fact, I raved of him, when the infection was at its worst and I was near dying." The gunslinger's voice suddenly rose half an octave, and his imitation of Eddie's voice was so good that Susannah



felt a coil of superstitious fright. "If you don't shut up about that goddam kid, Roland, I'll gag you with your own shirt! I'm sick of hearing about him! Do you remember saying that, Eddie?"

Eddie thought it over carefully. Roland had spoken of a thousand things as the two of them made their tortuous way up the beach from the door marked THE PRISONER to the one marked THE LADY OF THE SHADOWS, and he had mentioned what seemed like a thousand names in his fever-heated monologues—Alain, Cort, Jamie de Curry, Cuthbert (this one more often than all the others), Hax, Martin (or perhaps it was Marten, like the animal), Walter, Susan, even a guy with the unlikely name of Zoltan. Eddie had gotten very tired of hearing about these people he had never met (and didn't care to meet), but of course Eddie had had a few problems of his own at that time, heroin withdrawal and cosmic jet-lag being only two of them. And, if he was to be fair, he guessed Roland had gotten as tired of Eddie's own Fractured Fairy Tales—the ones about how he and Henry had grown up together and turned into junkies together—as Eddie had of Roland's. But he couldn't remember ever telling Roland he would gag him with his own shirt if he didn't stop talking about some kid.

"Nothing comes to you?" Roland asked. "Nothing at all?"

Was there something? Some far-off tickle, like the feeling of *deja vu* he'd gotten when he saw the slingshot hiding inside the chunk of wood jutting out of the stump? Eddie tried to find that tickle, but it was gone. He decided it had never been there in the first place; he only wanted it to be there, because Roland was hurting so badly.

"No," he said. "Sorry, man."

"But I did tell you." Roland's tone was calm, but urgency ran and pulsed beneath it like a scarlet thread. "The boy's name was Jake. I sacrificed him—killed him—in order that I might finally catch up with Walter and make him talk. I killed him under the mountains."

On this point Eddie could be more positive. "Well, maybe that's what happened, but it's not what you said happened. You said you went under the mountains alone, on some land of crazy handcar. You talked about that a lot while we were coming up the beach, Roland. About how scary it was to be alone."

"I remember. But I also remember telling you about the boy, and how he fell from the trestle into the chasm. And it's the distance between those two memories that is pulling my mind apart."

"I don't understand any of this," Susannah said worriedly.

"I think," Roland said, "that I'm just beginning to."

He threw more wood on the fire, sending thick sheaves of red sparks spiralling up into the dark sky, and then settled back between them. "I'll tell you a story that's true," he said, "and then I'll tell you a story that isn't true . . . but should be.

"I bought a mule in Pricetown, and when I finally got to lull, the last town before the desert, it was still fresh . . ."

So THE GUNSLINGER EMBARKED on the most recent part of his long tale. Eddie had heard isolated fragments of the story, but he listened in utter fascination, as did Susannah, for whom it was completely new. He told them about the bar with

the endless game of Watch Me going on in the corner, the piano player named Sheb, the woman named Allie with the scar on her forehead . . . and about Nort, the weed-eater who had died and then been brought back to some sort of tenebrous life by the man in black. He told them about Sylvia Pittston, that avatar of religious insanity, and about the final apocalyptic slaughter, in which he, Roland the Gunslinger, had killed every man, woman, and child in town.

"Holy crispy crap!" Eddie said in a low, shaky voice. "Now I know why you were so low on shells, Roland."

"Be quiet!" Susannah snapped. "Let him finish!"

Roland went on, telling his story as stolidly as he had crossed the desert after passing the hut of the last Dweller, a young man whose wild, strawberry-colored hair had reached almost to his waist. He told them about how his mule had finally died. He even told them about how the Dweller's pet bird, Zoltan, had eaten the mule's eyes.

He told them about the long desert days and the short desert nights which had come next, and how he had followed the cool remains of Walter's campfires, and how he had come at last, reeling and dying of dehydration, to the way station.

"It was empty. It had been empty, I think, since the days when yonder great bear was still a newly made thing. I stayed a night and pushed on. That's what happened . . . but now I'll tell you another story."

"The one that isn't true but should be?" Susannah asked.

Roland nodded. "In this made-up story—this fable—a gunslinger named Roland met a boy named Jake at the way station. This boy was from your world, from your city of New York, and from a when some-place between Eddie's 1987 and Odetta Holmes's 1963."

Eddie was leaning forward eagerly. "Is there a door in this story, Roland? A door marked THE BOY, or something like that?"

Roland shook his head. "The boy's doorway was death. He was on his way to school when a man—a man I believed to be Walter—pushed him into the street, where he was run over by a car. He heard this man say something like 'Get out of the way, let me through, I'm a priest.' Jake saw this man—just for an instant—and then he was in my world."

The gunslinger paused, looking into the fire.

"Now I want to leave this story of the boy who was never there and go back to what really happened for a minute. All right?"

Eddie and Susannah exchanged a puzzled glance and then Eddie made an "after you, my dear Alphonse" gesture with his hand.

"As I have said, the way station was deserted. There was, however, a pump that still worked. It was at the back of the stable where the coach-horses were kept. I followed my ears to it, but I would have found it even if it had been completely silent. I swelled the water, you see. After enough time in the desert, when you are on the edge of dying from thirst, you can really do that. I drank and then slept. When I woke, I drank again. I wanted to push on at once—the need to do that was like a fever. The medicine you brought me from your world—the astin—is wonderful stuff, Eddie, but there are fevers beyond the power of any medicine to cure, and this was one of them. I knew my body needed rest, but it still took every ounce of my willpower to stay there even one night. In the morning I felt rested, and so I refilled my waterskins and pushed on. I took nothing from that place but water. That's the most important part of what really

happened."

Susannah spoke in her most reasonable, pleasant, and Odetta Holmes—like voice.

"All right, that's what really happened. You refilled your waterskins and went on. Now tell us the rest of what didn't happen, Roland."

The gunslinger put the jawbone in his lap for a moment, curled his hands into fists, and rubbed his eyes with them—a curiously childlike gesture. Then he grasped the jawbone again, as if for courage, and went on.

"I hypnotized the boy who wasn't there," he said. "I did it with one of my shells. It's a trick I've known for years, and I learned it from a very unlikely source—Marten, my father's court magician. The boy was a good subject. While he was tranced, he told me the circumstances of his death, as I've told them to you. When I'd gotten as much of his story as I felt I could without upsetting or actually hurting him, I gave him a command that he should not remember anything about his dying when he woke up again."

"Who'd want to?" Eddie muttered.

Roland nodded. "Who, indeed? The boy passed from his trance directly into a natural sleep. I also slept. When we woke, I told the boy that I meant to catch the man in black. He knew who I meant; Walter had also stopped at the way station. Jake was afraid and hid from him. I'm sure Walter knew he was there, but it suited his purpose to pretend he didn't. He left the boy behind like a set trap.

"I asked him if there was anything to eat there. It seemed to me there must be. He looked healthy enough, and the desert climate is wonderful when it comes to preserving things. He had a little dried meat, and he said there was a cellar. He hadn't explored that, because he was afraid." The gunslinger looked at them grimly. "He was right to be afraid. I found food . . . and I also found a Speaking Demon."

Eddie looked down at the jawbone with widening eyes. Orange fire-light danced on its ancient curves and hoodoo teeth. "Speaking Demon? Do you mean that thing?"

"No," he said. "Yes. Both. Listen and you shall understand."

He told them about the inhuman groans he'd heard coming from the earth beyond the cellar; how he had seen sand running from between two of the old blocks which made up the cellar walls. He told them of approaching the hole that was appearing there as Jake screamed for him to come up.

He had commanded the demon to speak . . . and so the demon had, in the voice of Allie, the woman with the scar on her forehead, the woman who had kept the bar in Tull. Go slow past the Drawers, gun-slinger. While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket.

"The Drawers?" Susannah asked, startled.

"Yes." Roland looked at her closely. "That means something to you, doesn't it?"

"Yes . . . and no."

She spoke with great hesitation. Some of it, Roland divined, was simple reluctance to speak of things which were painful to her. He thought most of it, however, was a desire not to confuse issues which were already confused by saying more than she actually knew. He admired that. He admired her.

"Say what you can be sure of," he said. "No more than that."

"All right. The Drawers was a place Detta Walker knew about. A place Detta thought about. It's a slang term, one she picked up from listening to the grownups when they sat out on the porch and drank beer and talked about the old

days. It means a place that's spoiled, or useless, or both. There was something in the Drawers—in the idea of the Draw-ers—that called to Detta. Don't ask me what; I might have known once, but I don't anymore. And don't want to.

"Detta stole my Aunt Blue's china plate—the one my folks gave her for a wedding present—and took it to the Drawers—her Drawers—to break it. That place was a gravel-pit filled with trash. A dumping-ground. Later on, she sometimes picked up boys at roadhouses."

Susannah dropped her head for a moment, her lips pressed tightly together. Then she looked up again and went on.

"White boys. And when they took her back to their cars in the parking lot, she cock-teased them and then ran off. Those parking lots . . . they were the Drawers, too. It was a dangerous game, but she was young enough, quick enough, and mean enough to play it to the hilt and enjoy it. Later, in New York, she'd go on shoplifting expeditions . . . you know about that. Both of you. Always to the fancy stores—Macy's, Gimbel's, Bloomingdale's—and steal trinkets. And when she made up her mind to go on one of those sprees, she'd think: I'm goan to the Drawers today. Goan steal me some shitfum de white folks. Goan steal me sumpin forspecial and den break dot sumbitch."

She paused, lips trembling, looking into the fire. When she looked around again, Roland and Eddie saw tears standing in her eyes.

"I'm crying, but don't let that fool you. I remember doing those things, and I remember enjoying them. I guess I'm crying because I know I'd do it all again, if the circumstances were right."

Roland seemed to have regained some of his old serenity, his weird equilibrium.

"We have a proverb in my country, Susannah: 'The wise thief always prospers.'"

"I don't see nothing wise about stealing a bunch of paste jewelry," she said sharply.

"Were you ever caught?"

"No—"

He spread his hands as if to say, there you have it.

"So for Detta Walker, the Drawers were bad places?" Eddie asked. "Is that right? Because it doesn't exactly feel right."

"Bad and good at the same time. They were powerful places, places where she . . . she reinvented herself; I suppose you could say . . . hut they were lost places, too. And this is all off the subject of Roland's ghost-boy, isn't it?"

"Maybe not," Roland said. "We had Drawers as well, you see, in my world. It was slang for us, too, and the meanings are very similar."

"What did it mean to you and your friends?" Eddie asked.

"That varied slightly from place to place and situation to situation. It might mean a trash-midden. It might mean a whorehouse or a place where men came to gamble or chew devil-weed. But the most common' meaning that I know is also the simplest."

He looked at them both.

"The Drawers are places of desolation," he said. "The Drawers are the waste lands."

on brilliantly, not flickering. She knew from her school studies what that meant: it was a planet, not a star. Venus? She wondered. Or is the solar system of which this world is a part as different as everything else?

Again that feeling of unreality—the feeling that all this must surely be a dream—washed over her.

"Go on," she said. "What happened after the voice warned you about the Drawers and the little boy?"

"I punched my hand into the hole the sand had come from, as I was taught to do if such a thing ever happened to me. What I plucked forth was a jawbone . . . but not this one. The jawbone I took from the wall of the way station was much larger; from one of the Great Old Ones, I have almost no doubt."

"What happened to it?" Susannah asked quietly.

"One night I gave it to the boy," Roland said. The fire painted his cheeks with hot orange highlights and dancing shadows. "As a protection—a kind of talisman. Later I felt it had served its purpose and threw it away."

"So whose jawbone you got there, Roland?" Eddie asked.

Roland held it up, looked at it long and thoughtfully, and let it drop back.

"Later, after Jake . . . after he died . . . I caught up with the men I had been chasing."

"With Walter," Susannah said.

"Yes. We held palaver; he and I . . . long palaver. I fell asleep at some point, and when I woke up, Walter was dead. A hundred years dead at least, and probably more. There was nothing left of him but bones, which was fitting enough, since we were in a place of bones."

"Yeah, it must have been a pretty long palaver, all right," Eddie said dryly.

Susannah frowned slightly at this, but Roland only nodded. "Long and long," he said, looking into the fire.

"You came to in the morning and reached the Western Sea that very evening," Eddie said. "That night the lobstrosities came, right?"

Roland nodded again. "Yes. But before I left the place where Walter and I had spoken . . . or dreamed . . . or whatever it was we did . . . I took this from the skull of his skeleton." He lifted the bone and the orange light again skated off the teeth.

Walter's jawbone, Eddie thought, and felt a little chill work through him. The jawbone of the man in black. Remember this, Eddie my boy, the next time you get to thinking Roland's maybe just another one of the guys. He's been carrying it around with him all this time like some kind of a . . . a cannibal's trophy.

Jee-sus.

"I remember what I thought when I took it," Roland said. "I remember very well; it is the only memory I have of that time which hasn't doubled on me. I thought, 'It was bad luck to throw away what I found when I found the boy. This will replace it.' Only then I heard Walter's laughter—his mean, tittery laughter. I heard his voice, too."

"What did he say?" Susannah asked.

"Too late, gunslinger," Roland said. "That's what he said. 'Too late—your luck will be bad from now until the end of eternity—that is your ka.' "

"ALL RIGHT," EDDIE SAID at last. "I understand the basic paradox. Your, memory is divided—"

"Not divided. Doubled."

"All right; it's almost the same thing, isn't it?" Eddie grasped a twig and made his own little drawing in the sand:

He tapped the line on the left. "This is your memory of the time before you got to the way station—a single track."

"Yes."

He tapped the line on the right. "And after you came out on the far side of the mountains in the place of bones . . . the place where Walter was waiting for you. Also a single track."

"Yes."

Now Eddie first indicated the middle area and then drew a rough circle around it.

"That's what you've got to do, Roland—close this double track off. Build a stockade around it in your mind and then forget it. Because it doesn't mean anything, it doesn't change anything, it's gone, it's done—"

"But it isn't." Roland held up the bone. "If my memories of the boy Jake are false—and I know they are—how can I have this? I took it to replace the one I threw away . . . but the one I threw away came from the cellar of the way station, and along the track I know is true, / never went down cellar! I never spoke with the demon! I moved on alone, with fresh water and nothing else!"

"Roland, listen to me," Eddie said earnestly. "If that jawbone you're holding was the one from the way station, that would be one thing. But isn't it possible that if you hallucinated that whole thing—the way station, the kid, the Speaking Demon—then maybe you took Walter's jawbone because—"

"It was no hallucination," Roland said. He looked at them both with his faded blue bombardier's eyes and then did something neither expected . . . something Eddie would have sworn Roland did not know he meant to do himself.

He threw the jawbone into the fire.

17

FOR A MOMENT IT only lay there, a white relic bent in a ghostly half-grin. Then it suddenly blazed red, washing the clearing with dazzling scarlet light. Eddie and Susannah cried out and threw their hands up to shield their eyes from that burning shape.

The bone began to change. Not to melt, but to change. The teeth which leaned out of it like gravestones began to draw together in clumps.

The mild curve of the upper arc straightened, then snubbed down at the tip. Eddie's hands fell into his lap and he stared at the bone which was no longer a bone with gape-jawed wonder. It was now the color of burn-ing steel. The teeth had become three inverted V's, the middle one larger than those on the ends. And suddenly Eddie saw what it wanted to become, just as he had seen the slingshot in the wood of the stump.

He thought it was a key.

You must remember the shape, he thought feverishly. You must, you must.

His eyes traced it desperately—three V's, the one in the center larger and deeper than the two on the end. Three notches . . . and the one closest the end had a squiggle, the shallow shape of a lower-case s . . .

Then the shape in the flames changed again. The bone which had become something like a key drew inward, concentrating itself into bright, overlapping petals and folds as dark and velvety as a moonless summer midnight. For a moment Eddie saw a rose—a triumphant rose that might have bloomed in the dawn of this world's first day, a thing of depthless, timeless beauty. His eye saw, and his heart was opened. It was as if all love and life had suddenly risen from Roland's dead artifact; it was there in the fire, burning out in triumph and some wonderful, inchoate defiance, declaring that despair was a mirage and death a dream.

The rose! he thought incoherently. First the key, then the rose! Behold! Behold the opening of the way to the Tower!

There was a thick cough from the fire. A fan of sparks twisted outwards.

Susannah screamed and rolled away, beating at the orange flecks on her dress as the flames gushed upward toward the starry sky. Eddie didn't move. He sat transfixed in his vision, held in a cradle of wonder which was both gorgeous and terrible, unmindful of the sparks which danced across his skin. Then the flames sank back.

The bone was gone.

The key was gone.

The rose was gone.

Remember, he thought. Remember the rose . . . and remember the shape of the key.

Susannah was sobbing with shock and terror, but he ignored her for the moment and found the stick with which he and Roland had both drawn. And in the dirt he made this shape with a shaking hand:

18

"WHY DID YOU DO it?" Susannah asked at last. "Why, for God's sake— and what was it?"

Fifteen minutes had gone by. The fire had been allowed to burn low; the scattered embers had either been stamped out or had gone out on their own. Eddie sat with his arms about his wife: Susannah sat before him, with her back against his chest. Roland was off to one side, knees hugged to his chest, looking moodily into the orange-red coals. So far as Eddie could tell, neither of them had seen the bone change. They had both seen it glowing superhot, and Roland had seen it explode (or had it imploded? to Eddie that seemed closer to what he had seen), but that was all. Or so he believed; Roland, however, sometimes kept his own counsel, and when he decided to play his cards close to the vest, he played

them very close indeed, Eddie knew that from bitter experience. He thought of telling them what he had seen—or thought he had seen—and decided to play his own cards tight and close-up, at least for the time being.

Of the jawbone itself there was no sign—not even a splinter.

"I did it because a voice spoke in my mind and told me I must," Roland said. "It was the voice of my father; of all my fathers. When one hears such a voice, not to obey—and at once—is unthinkable. So I was taught. As to what it was, I can't say . . . not now, at least. I only know that the bone has spoken its final word. I have carried it all this way to hear it."

Or to see it, Eddie thought, and again: Remember. Remember the rose. And remember the shape of the key.

"It almost flash-fried us!" She sounded both tired and exasperated.

Roland shook his head. "I think it was more like the sort of firework the barons used to sometimes shoot into the sky at their year-end parties. Bright and startling, but not dangerous."

Eddie had an idea. "The doubling in your mind, Roland—is it gone? Did it leave when the bone exploded, or whatever it did?"

He was almost convinced that it had; in the movies he'd seen, such rough shock-therapy almost always worked. But Roland shook his head.

Susannah shifted in Eddie's arms. "You said you were beginning to understand."

Roland nodded. "I think so, yes. If I'm right, I fear for Jake. Wherever he is, whenever he is, I fear for him."

"What do you mean?" Eddie asked.

Roland got up, went to his roll of hides, and began to spread them out. "Enough stories and excitement for one night. It's time to sleep. In the morning we'll follow the bear's backtrail and see if we can find the portal he was set to guard. I'll tell you what I know and what I believe has happened—what I believe is happening still—along the way."

With that he wrapped himself in an old blanket and a new deerskin, rolled away from the fire, and would say no more.

Eddie and Susannah lay down together. When they were sure the gunslinger must be asleep, they made love. Roland heard them going about it as he lay wakeful and heard their quiet after-love talk. Most of it was about him. He lay quietly, open eyes looking into the darkness long after their talk had ceased and their breathing had evened out into a single easy note.

It was, he thought, fine to be young and in love. Even in the grave-yard which this world had become, it was fine.

Enjoy it while you can, he thought, because there is more death ahead. We have come to a stream of blood. That it will lead us to a river of the same stuff I have no doubt. And, further along, to an ocean. In this world the graves yawn and none of the dead rest easy.

As dawn began to come up in the east, he closed his eyes. Slept briefly. And dreamed of Jake.

19

EDDIE ALSO DREAMED—DREAMED he was back in New York, walking along Second Avenue with a book in his hand.

In this dream it was spring. The air was warm, the city was blooming, and



homesickness sobbed within him like a muscle with a fishhook caught deep within it. Enjoy this dream, and make it go on as long as you can, he thought. Savor it . . . because this is as close to New York as you're going to get. You can't go home, Eddie. That part's done.

He looked down at the book and was utterly unsurprised to find it was *You Can't Go Home Again*, by Thomas Wolfe. Stamped into the dark red cover were three shapes; key, rose, and door. He stopped for a moment, flipped the book open, and read the first line. The man in black fled across the desert, Wolfe had written, and the gunslinger followed.

Eddie closed it and walked on. It was about nine in the morning, he judged, maybe nine-thirty, and traffic on Second Avenue was light. Taxis honked and wove their way from lane to lane with spring sunshine twinkling off their windshields and bright yellow paintjobs. A bum on the corner of Second and Fifty-second asked him for a handout and Eddie tossed the book with the red cover into his lap. He observed (also without surprise) that the bum was Enrico Balazar. He was sitting cross-legged in front of a magic shop. HOUSE OF CARDS, the sign in the window read, and the display inside showed a tower which had been built of Tarot cards. Standing on top was a model of King Kong. There was a tiny radar-dish growing out of the great ape's head.

Eddie walked on, lazing his way downtown, the street-signs floating past him. He knew where he was going as soon as he saw it: a small shop on the corner of Second and Forty-sixth.

Yeah, he thought. A feeling of great relief swept through him. This is the place. The very place. The window was full of hanging meats and cheeses. TOM AND GERRY'S ARTISTIC DELI, the sign read. PARTY PLATTERS OUR SPECIALTY! As he stood looking in, someone else he knew came around the corner. It was Jack Andolini, wearing a three-piece suit the color of vanilla ice cream and carrying a black cane in his left hand. Half of his face was gone, lopped off by the claws of the lobstrosities.

Go on in, Eddie, Jack said as he passed. After all, there are other worlds than these and that fuckin train rolls through all of them.

I can't, Eddie replied. The door is locked. He didn't know how he knew this, but he did; knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Dad-a-chum, dud-a-chee, not to worry, you've got the key, Jack said, not looking back. Eddie looked down and saw he did have a key; a primitive-looking thing with three notches like inverted Vs.

That little s-shape at the end of the last notch is the secret, he thought. He stepped under the awning of Tom and Gerry's Artistic Deli and inserted the key in the lock. It turned easily. He opened the door and stepped through into a huge open field. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the traffic on Second Avenue hurrying by, and then the door slammed shut and fell over. There was nothing behind it. Nothing at all. He turned back to survey his new surroundings, and what he saw filled him with terror at first. The field was a deep scarlet, as if some titanic battle had been fought here and the ground had been drenched with so much blood that it could not all be absorbed.

Then he realized that it was not blood he was looking at, but roses.

That feeling of mingled joy and triumph surged through him again, swelling his heart until he felt it might burst within him. He raised his clenched fists high over his head in a gesture of victory . . . and then froze that way.

The field stretched on for miles, climbing a gentle slope of land, and standing at the horizon was the Dark Tower. It was a pillar of dumb stone rising so high into the sky that he could barely discern its tip. Its base, surrounded by red, shouting roses, was formidable, titanic with weight and size, yet the Tower became oddly graceful as it rose and tapered. The stone of which it had been made was not black, as he had imagined it would be, but soot-colored. Narrow, slitted windows marched about it in a rising spiral; below the windows ran an almost endless flight of stone stairs, circling up and up. The Tower was a dark gray exclamation point planted in the earth and rising above the field of blood-red roses. The sky arched above it was blue, but filled with puffy white clouds like sailing ships. They flowed above and around the top of the Dark Tower in an endless stream.

How gorgeous it is! Eddie marvelled. How gorgeous and strange! But his feeling of joy and triumph had departed; he was left with a sense of deep malaise and impending doom. He looked about him and realized with sudden horror that he was standing in the shadow of the Tower. No, not just standing in it; buried alive in it.

He cried out but his cry was lost in the golden blast of some tremendous horn. It came from the top of the Tower, and seemed to fill the world. As that note of warning held and drew out over the field where he stood, blackness welled from the windows which girdled the Tower. It overspilled them and spread across the sky in flaggy streams which came together and formed a growing blotch of darkness. It did not look like a cloud; it looked like a tumor hanging over the earth. The sky was blotted out. And, he saw, it was not a cloud or a tumor but a shape, some tenebrous, cyclopean shape racing toward the place where he stood. It would do no good to run from that beast coalescing in the sky above the field of roses; it would catch him, clutch him, and bear him away. Into the Dark Tower it would bear him, and the world of light would see him no more.

Rents formed in the darkness and terrible inhuman eyes, each easily the size of the bear Shardik which lay dead in the forest, peered down at him. They were red—red as roses, red as blood.

Jack Andolini's dead voice hammered in his ears: A thousand worlds, Eddie—ten thousand!—and that train rolls through every one. If you can get it started. And if you do get it started, your troubles are only beginning, because this device is a real bastard to shut down.

Jack's voice had become mechanical, chanting. A real bastard to shut down, Eddie boy, you better believe it, this bastard is—

"—SHUTTING DOWN! SHUTDOWN WILL BE COMPLETE IN ONE HOUR AND SIX MINUTES!"

In his dream, Eddie threw his hands up to shield his eyes ...

20

... AND WOKE, SITTING BOLT upright beside the dead campfire. He was looking at the world from between his own spread fingers. And still that voice rolled on and on, the voice of some heartless SWAT Squad commander bellowing through a bullhorn.

"THERE IS NO DANGER! REPEAT, THERE IS NO DANGER! FIVE SUBNUCLEAR CELLS ARE DORMANT, TWO SUBNUCLEAR CELLS ARE NOW IN SHUTDOWN PHASE, ONE SUBNUCLEAR CELL IS OPERATING AT TWO PER CENT CAPACITY. THESE CELLS ARE OF NO VALUE! REPEAT, THESE

CELLS ARE OF NO VALUE! REPORT LOCATION TO NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS, LIMITED!  
CALL 1-900-44! THE CODE WORD FOR THIS DEVICE IS 'SHARDIK.' REWARD IS OFFERED!  
REPEAT, REWARD ZS OFFERED!"

The voice fell silent. Eddie saw Roland standing at the edge of the clearing, holding Susannah in the crook of one arm. They were staring toward the sound of the voice, and as the recorded announcement began again, Eddie was finally able to shake off the chill remnants of his nightmare. He got up and joined Roland and Susannah, wondering how many centuries it had been since that announcement, pro-programmed to broadcast only in the event of a total system breakdown, had been recorded.

"THIS DEVICE IS SHUTTING DOWN! SHUTDOWN WILL BE COMPLETE IN ONE HOUR AND FIVE MINUTES! THERE IS NO DANGER! REPEAT—"

Eddie touched Susannah's arm and she looked around. "How long has this been going on?"

"About fifteen minutes. You were dead to the w—" She broke off. "Eddie, you look terrible! Are you sick?"

"No. I just had a bad dream."

Roland was studying him in a way that made Eddie feel uncomfortable. "Sometimes there's truth in dreams, Eddie. What was yours?"

He thought for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't remember."

"You know, I doubt that."

Eddie shrugged and favored Roland with a thin smile. "Doubt away, then—be my guest. And how are you this morning, Roland?"

"The same," Roland said. His faded blue eyes still coned Eddie's face.

"Stop it," Susannah said. Her voice was brisk, but Eddie caught an undertone of nervousness. "Both of you. I got better things to do than watch you two dance around and kick each other's shins like a couple of little kids playin Two for Flinching. Specially this morning, with that dead bear trying to yell down the whole world."

The gunslinger nodded, but kept his eyes on Eddie. "All right . . . but are you sure there's nothing you want to tell me, Eddie?"

He thought about it then—really thought about telling. What he had seen in the fire, what he had seen in his dream. He decided against it. Perhaps it was only the memory of the rose in the fire, and the roses

which had blanketed that dream-field in such fabulous profusion. Me knew he could not tell these things as his eyes had seen them and his heart had felt them; he could only cheapen them. And, at least for the time being, he wanted to ponder these things alone.

But remember, he told himself again . . . except the voice in his mind didn't sound much like his own. It seemed deeper, older—the voice of a stranger. Remember the rose . . . and the shape of the key.

"I will," he murmured.

"You will what?" Roland asked.

"Tell," Eddie said. "If anything comes up that seems, you know, really important, I'll tell you. Both of you. Right now there isn't. So if we're going somewhere, Shane, old buddy, let's saddle up."

"Shane? Who is this Shane?"

"I'll tell you that some other time, too. Meantime, let's go."

They packed the gear they had brought with them from the old campsite and headed back, Susannah riding in her wheelchair again. Eddie had an idea she wouldn't be riding in it for long.

21

ONCE, BEFORE EDDIE HAD become too interested in the subject of heroin to be interested in much else, he and a couple of friends had driven over to New Jersey to see a couple of speed-metal groups— Anthrax and Megadeth—in concert at the Meadowlands. He believed that Anthrax had been slightly louder than the repeating announcement coming from the fallen bear, but he wasn't a hundred per cent sure. Roland stopped them while they were still half a mile from the clearing in the woods and tore six small scraps of cloth from his old shirt. They stuffed them in their ears and then went on. Even the cloth didn't do much to deaden the steady blast of sound.

"THIS DEVICE IS SHUTTING DOWN!" the bear blared as they stepped into the clearing again. It lay as it had lain, at the foot of the tree Eddie had climbed, a fallen Colossus with its legs apart and its knees in the air, like a furry female giant who had died trying to give birth. "SHUTDOWN WILL BE COMPLETE IN FORTY-SEVEN MINUTES! THERE IS NO DANGER—"

Yes, there is, Eddie thought, picking up the scattered hides which had not been shredded in either the bear's attack or its flailing death-throes. Plenty of danger. To my fucking ears. He picked up Roland's gunbelt and silently handed it over. The chunk of wood he had been working on lay nearby; he grabbed it and tucked it into the pocket in the back of Susannah's wheelchair as the gunslinger slowly buckled the wide leather belt around his waist and cinched the rawhide tiedown.

"—IN SHUTDOWN PHASE, ONE SUBNUCLEAR CELL OPERATING AT ONE PER CENT CAPACITY. THESE CELLS—"

Susannah followed Eddie, holding in her lap a carry-all bag she had sewn herself. As Eddie handed her the hides, she stuffed them into the bag. When all of them were stored away, Roland tapped Eddie on the arm and handed him a shoulderpack. What it contained mostly was deer-meat, heavily salted from a natural lick Roland had found about three miles up the little creek. The gunslinger had already donned a similar pack. His purse—restocked and once again bulging with all sorts of odds and ends—hung from his other shoulder.

A strange, home-made harness with a seat of stitched deerskin dangled from a nearby branch. Roland plucked it off, studied it for a moment, and then draped it over his back and knotted the straps below his chest. Susannah made a sour face at diis, and Roland saw it. He did not try to speak—this close to the bear, he couldn't have made himself heard even by shouting at the top of his voice—but he shrugged sympathetically and spread his hands: You know well need it. She shrugged back. / know . . . but that doesn't mean I like it.

The gunslinger pointed across the clearing. A pair of leaning, splintered spruce trees marked the place where Shardik, who had once been known as Mir in these parts, had entered the clearing.

Eddie leaned toward Susannah, made a circle with his thumb and forefinger, then raised his eyebrows interrogatively. Okay?

She nodded, then pressed the heels of her palms against her ears. Okay—but let's get out of here before I go deaf.

The three of them moved across the clearing, Eddie pushing Susan-nah, who held the bag of hides in her lap. The pocket in the back of her wheelchair was stuffed with other items; die piece of wood with the slingshot still mostly hidden inside it was only one of them.

From behind them the bear continued to roar out its final communi-cation to the world, telling them shutdown would be complete in forty minutes. Eddie couldn't wait. The broken spruces leaned in toward each other, forming a rude gate, and Eddie thought: This is where the quest for Roland's Dark Tower really begins, at least for us.

He thought of his dream again—the spiraling windows issuing their unfurling flags of darkness, flags which spread over the field of roses like a stain—and as they passed beneath the leaning trees, a deep shudder gripped him.

22

THEY WERE ABLE TO use the wheelchair longer than Roland had expected. The firs of this forest were very old, and their spreading branches had created a deep carpet of needles which discouraged most undergrowth. Susannah's arms were strong—stronger than Eddie's, although Roland did not think that would be true much longer—and she wheeled herself along easily over the level, shady forest floor. When they came to one of the trees the bear had pushed over, Roland lifted her out of the chair and Eddie boosted it over the obstacle.

From behind them, only a little deadened by distance, the bear told them, at the top of its mechanical voice, that the capacity of its last operating nuclear subcell was now negligible.

"I hope you keep that damn harness lying empty over your shoulders all day!" Susannah shouted at the gunslinger.

Roland agreed, but less than fifteen minutes later the land began to slope downward and this old section of the forest began to be invaded with smaller, younger trees: birch, alder, and a few stunted maples scab-bling grimly in the soil for purchase. The carpet of needles thinned and the wheels of Susannah's chair began to catch in the low, tough bushes which grew in the alleys between the trees. Their thin branches boinged and rattled in the stainless steel spokes. Eddie threw his weight against the handles and they were able to go on for another quarter of a mile that way. Then the slope began to grow more steep, and the ground underfoot became mushy.

"Time for a pig-back, lady," Roland said.

"Let's try the chair a little longer, what do you say? Going might get easier—" Roland shook his head. "If you try that hill, you'll . . . what did you call it, Eddie? ... do a dugout?"

Eddie shook his head, grinning. "It's called doing a doughnut, Roland. A term from my misspent sidewalk-surfing days."

"Whatever you call it, it means landing on your head. Come on, Susannah. Up you come."

"I hate being a cripple," Susannah said crossly, but allowed Eddie to hoist her out of the chair and worked with him to seat herself firmly in the harness

Roland wore on his back. Once she was in place, she touched the butt of Roland's

pistol. "Y'all want this baby?" she asked Eddie.

He shook his head. "You're faster. And you know it, too."

She grunted and adjusted the belt, settling the gunbutt so it was easily accessible to her right hand. "I'm slowing you boys down and I know that . . . but if we ever make it to some good old two-lane blacktop, I'll leave the both of you kneelin in the blocks."

"I don't doubt it," Roland said . . . and then cocked his head. The woods had fallen silent.

"Br'er Bear has finally given up," Susannah said. "Praise God."

"I thought it still had seven minutes to go," Eddie said.

Roland adjusted the straps of the harness. "Its clock must have started running a little slow during the last five or six hundred years."

"You really think it was that old, Roland?"

Roland nodded. "At least. And now it's passed . . . the last of the Twelve Guardians, for all we know."

"Yeah, ask me if I give a shit," Eddie replied, and Susannah laughed.

"Are you comfortable?" Roland asked her.

"No. My butt hurts already, but go on. Just try not to drop me."

Roland nodded and started down the slope. Eddie followed, pushing the empty chair and trying not to bang it too badly on the rocks which had begun to jut out of the ground like big white knuckles. Now that the bear had finally shut up, he thought the forest seemed much too quiet—it almost made him feel like a character in one of those hokey old jungle movies about cannibals and giant apes.

23

THE BEAR'S BACKTRAIL WAS easy to find but tougher to follow. Five miles or so out of the clearing, it led them through a low, boggy area that was not quite a swamp. By the time the ground began to rise and firm up a little again, Roland's faded jeans were soaked to the knees and he was breathing in long, steady rasps. Still, he was in slightly better shape than Eddie, who had found wrestling Susannah's wheelchair through the muck and standing water hard going.

"Time to rest and eat something," Roland said.

"Oh boy, gimme eats," Eddie puffed. He helped Susannah out of the harness and set her down on the bole of a fallen tree with claw-marks slashed into its trunk in long diagonal grooves. Then he half-sat, half-collapsed next to her.

"You got my wheelchair pretty muddy, white boy," Susannah said. "It's all goan be in my repote."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Next carwash we come to, I'll push you through myself. I'll even Turtle-wax the goddamn thing. Okay?"

She smiled. "You got a date, handsome."

Eddie had one of Roland's waterskins cinched around his waist. He tapped it.

"Okay?"

"Yes," Roland said. "Not too much now; a little more for all of us before we set out again. That way no one takes a cramp."

"Roland, Eagle Scout of Oz," Eddie said, and giggled as he unslung the waterskin.

"What is this Oz?"

"A make-believe place in a movie," Susannah said.

"Oz was a lot more than that. My brother Henry used to read me the stories once in a while. I'll tell you one some night, Roland."

"That would be fine," the gunslinger replied seriously. "I am hungry to know more of your world."

"Oz isn't our world, though. Like Susannah said, it's a make-believe place—" Roland handed them chunks of meat which had been wrapped in broad leaves of some sort. "The quickest way to learn about a new place is to know what it dreams of. I would hear of this Oz."

"Okay, that's a date, too. Suze can tell you the one about Dorothy and Toto and the Tin Woodman, and I'll tell you all the rest." He bit into his piece of meat and rolled his eyes approvingly. It had taken the flavor of the leaves in which it had been rolled, and was delicious. Eddie wolfed his ration, stomach gurgling busily all the while. Now that he was getting his breath back, he felt good—great, in fact. His body was growing a solid sheath of muscle, and every part of it felt at peace with every other part.

Don't worry, he thought. Everything will be arguing again by tonight. I think he's gonna push on until I'm ready to drop in my tracks.

Susannah ate more delicately, chasing every second or third bite with a little sip of water, turning the meat in her hands, eating from the outside in. "Finish what you started last night," she invited Roland. "You said you thought you understood these conflicting memories of yours."

Roland nodded. "Yes. I think both memories are true. One is a little truer than the other, but that does not negate the truth of that other."

"Makes no sense to me," Eddie said. "Either this boy Jake was at the way station or he wasn't, Roland."

"It is a paradox—something that is and isn't at the same time. Until it's resolved, I will continue divided. That's bad enough, but the basic split is widening. I can feel that happening. It is ... unspeakable."

"What do you think caused it?" Susannah asked.

"I told you the boy was pushed in front of a car. Pushed. Now, who do we know who liked to push people in front of things?"

Understanding dawned in her face. "Jack Mort. Do you mean he was the one who pushed this boy into the street?"

"Yes."

"But you said the man in black did it," Eddie objected. "Your buddy Walter. You said that the boy saw him—a man who looked like a priest. Didn't the kid even hear him say he was? 'Let me through, I'm a priest,' something like that?"

"Oh, Walter was there. They were both there, and they both pushed Jake."

"Somebody bring the Thorazine and the strait-jacket," Eddie called. "Roland just went over the high side."

Roland paid no attention to this; he was coming to understand that Eddie's jokes and clowning were his way of dealing with stress. Cuthbert had not been much different ... as Susannah was, in her way, not so different from Alain. "What exasperates me about all of this," he said, "is that I should have known. I was in Jack Mort, after all, and I had access to his thoughts, just as I had access to yours, Eddie, and yours, Susannah. I saw Jake while I was in Mort. I saw him through Mort's eyes, and I knew Mort planned to push him. Not only that; I stopped him from doing it. All I had to do was enter his body. Not that he knew

that was what it was; he was concentrating so hard on what he planned to do that he actually thought I was a fly landing on his neck."

Eddie began to understand. "If Jake wasn't pushed into the street, he never died. And if he never died, he never came into this world. And if he never came into this world, you never met him at the way station. Right?"

"Right. The thought even crossed my mind that if Jack Mort meant to kill the boy, I would have to stand aside and let him do it. To avoid creating the very paradox that is tearing me apart. But I couldn't do that. I ... I ..."

"You couldn't kill this kid twice, could you?" Eddie asked softly. "Every time I just about make up my mind that you're as mechanical as that bear, you surprise me with something that actually seems human. Goddam."

"Quit it, Eddie," Susannah said.

Eddie took a look at the gunslinger's slightly lowered face and gri-maced.

"Sorry, Roland. My mother used to say that my mouth had a bad habit of running away with my mind."

"It's all right. I had a friend who was the same way."

"Cuthbert?"

Roland nodded. He looked at his diminished right hand for a long moment, then clenched it into a painful fist, sighed, and looked up at them again. Somewhere, deeper in the forest, a lark sang sweetly.

"Here is what I believe. If I had not entered Jack Mort when I did, he still wouldn't have pushed Jake that day. Not then. Why not? Ka-tet. Simply that. For the first time since the last of the friends with whom I set forth on this quest died, I have found myself once again at the center of ka-tet."

"Quartet?" Eddie asked doubtfully.

The gunslinger shook his head. "Ka—the word you think of as 'des-tiny,' Eddie, although the actual meaning is much more complex and hard to define, as is almost always the case with words of the High Speech. And tet, which means a group of people with the same interests and goals. We three are a tet, for instance. Ka-tet, is the place where many lives are joined by fate."

"Like in The Bridge of San Luis Rey," Susannah murmured.

"What's that?" Roland asked.

"A story about some people who die together when the bridge they're crossing collapses. It's famous in our world."

Roland nodded his understanding. "In this case, ka-tet bound Jake, Walter, Jack Mort, and me. There was no trap, as I first suspected when I realized who Jack Mort meant to be his next victim, because ka-tet cannot be changed or bent to the will of any one person. But ka-tet can be seen, known, and understood.

Walter saw, and Walter knew." The gunslinger struck his thigh with his fist and exclaimed bitterly, "How he must have been laughing inside when I finally caught up to him!"

"Let's go back to what would have happened if you hadn't messed up Jack Mort's plans on the day he was following Jake," Eddie said. "You're saying that if you hadn't stopped Mort, someone or something else would have. Is that right?"

"Yes—because it wasn't the right day for Jake to die. It was close to the right day, but not the right day. I felt that, too. Perhaps, just before he did it,

Mort would have seen someone watching him. Or a perfect stranger would have intervened. Or—"

"Or a cop," Susannah said. "He might have seen a cop in the wrong place and at



the wrong time."

"Yes. The exact reason—the agent of ka-tet—doesn't matter. I know from firsthand experience that Mort was as wily as an old fox. If he sensed any slightest thing wrong, he would have called it off and waited for another day.

"I know something else, as well. He hunted in disguise. On the day he dropped the brick on Detta Holmes's head, he was wearing a knitted cap and an old sweater several sizes too big for him. He wanted to look like a winebibber, because he pushed the brick from a building where a large number of sots kept their dens. You see?"

They nodded.

"On the day, years later, when he pushed you in front of the train, Susannah, he was dressed as a construction worker. He was wearing a big yellow helmet he thought of as a 'hardhat' and a fake moustache. On the day when he actually would have pushed Jake into traffic, causing his death, he would have been dressed as a priest."

"Jesus," Susannah nearly whispered. "The man who pushed him in New York was Jack Mort, and the man he saw at the way station was this fella you were chasing—Walter."

"Yes."

"And the little boy thought they were the same man because they were both wearing the same kind of black robe?"

Roland nodded. "There was even a physical resemblance between Walter and Jack Mort. Not as if they were brothers, I don't mean that, but both were tall men with dark hair and very pale complexions. And given the fact that Jake was dying when he got his only good look at Mort and was in a strange place and scared almost witless when he got his only good look at Walter, I think his mistake was both understandable and forgivable. If there's a horse's ass in this picture, it's me, for not realizing the truth sooner."

"Would Mort have known he was being used?" Eddie asked. Thinking back to his own experiences and wild thoughts when Roland had invaded his mind, he didn't see how Mort could not know . . . but Roland was shaking his head.

"Walter would have been extremely subtle. Mort would have thought the priest disguise his own idea ... or so I believe. He would not have recognized the voice of an intruder—of Walter—whispering deep within his mind, telling him what to do."

"Jack Mort," Eddie marvelled. "It was Jack Mort all the time."

"Yes . . . with assistance from Walter. And so I ended up saving Jake's life after all. When I made Mort jump from the subway platform in front of the train, I changed everything."

Susannah asked, "If this Walter was able to enter our world—through his own private door, maybe—whenever he wanted, couldn't he have used someone else to push your little boy? If he could suggest to Mort that he dress up like a priest, then he could make somebody else do it ... What, Eddie? Why are you shaking your head?"

"Because I don't think Walter would want that to happen. What Walter wanted is what is happening ... for Roland to be losing his mind, bit by bit. Isn't that right?"

The gunslinger nodded.

"Walter couldn't have done it that way even if he had wanted to," Eddie added,

"because he was dead long before Roland found the doors on the beach. When Roland went through that last one and into Jack Mort's head, ole Walt's messin-around days were done."

Susannah thought about this, then nodded her head. "I see ... I think. This time-travel business is some confusing shit, isn't it?"

Roland began to pick up his goods and strap them back into place. "Time we were moving on."

Eddie stood up and shrugged into his pack. "You can take comfort from one thing, at least," he told Roland. "You—or this ka-tet business— were able to save the kid after all."

Roland had been knotting the harness-strings at his chest. Now he looked up, and the blazing clarity of his eyes made Eddie flinch backward. "Have I?" he asked harshly. "Have I really? I'm going insane an inch at a time, trying to live with two versions of the same reality. I had hoped at first that one or the other would begin to fade away, but that's not happening. In fact, the exact opposite is happening: those two realities are growing louder and louder in my head, clamoring at each other like opposing factions which must soon go to war. So tell me this, Eddie: How do you suppose Jake feels? How do you suppose it feels to know you are dead in one world and alive in another?"

The lark sang again, but none of them noticed. Eddie stared into the faded blue eyes blazing out of Roland's pale face and could not think of a thing to say.

24

THEY CAMPED ABOUT FIFTEEN miles due east of the dead bear that night, slept the sleep of the completely exhausted (even Roland slept the night through, although his dreams were nightmare carnival-rides), and were up the next morning at sunrise. Eddie kindled a small fire without speaking, and glanced at Susannah as a pistol-shot rang out in the woods nearby.

"Breakfast," she said.

Roland returned three minutes later with a hide slung over one shoulder. On it lay the freshly gutted corpse of a rabbit. Susannah cooked it. They ate and moved on.

Eddie kept trying to imagine what it would be like to have a memory of your own death. On that one he kept coming up short.

25

SHORTLY AFTER NOON THEY entered an area where most of the trees had been pulled over and the bushes mashed flat—it looked as though a cyclone had touched down here many years before, creating a wide and dismal alley of destruction.

"We're close to the place we want to find," Roland said. "He pulled down everything to clear the sightlines. Our friend the bear wanted no surprises. He was big, but not complacent."

"Has it left us any surprises?" Eddie asked.

"He may have done so." Roland smiled a little and touched Eddie on the shoulder.

"But there's this—they'll be old surprises."

Their progress through this zone of destruction was slow. Most of the fallen trees were very old—many had almost rejoined the soil from which they had

sprung—but they still made enough of a tangle to create a formidable obstacle course. It would have been difficult enough if all three of them had been able-bodied; with Susannah strapped to the gunslinger's back in her harness, it became an exercise in aggravation and endurance.

The flattened trees and jumbles of underbrush served to obscure the bear's backtrail, and that also worked to slow their speed. Until mid-day they had followed claw-marks as clear as trail-blazes on the trees. Here, however, near its starting point, the bear's rage had not been full-blown, and these handy signs of its passage disappeared. Roland moved slowly, looking for droppings in the bushes and tufts of hair on the tree-trunks over which the bear had climbed. It took all afternoon to cross three miles of this decayed jumble.

Eddie had just decided they were going to lose the light and would have to camp in these creepy surroundings when they came to a thin skirt of alders. Beyond it, he could hear a stream babbling noisily over a bed of stones. Behind them, the setting sun was radiating spokes of sullen red light across the jumbled ground they had just crossed, turning the fallen trees into crisscrossing black shapes like Chinese ideograms.

Roland called a halt and eased Susannah down. He stretched his back, twisting it this way and that with his hands on his hips.

"That it for the night?" Eddie asked.

Roland shook his head. "Give Eddie your gun, Susannah."

She did as he said, looking at him questioningly.

"Come on, Eddie. The place we want is on the other side of those trees. We'll have a look. We might do a little work, as well."

"What makes you think—"

"Open your ears."

Eddie listened and realized he heard machinery. He further realized that he had been hearing it for some time now. "I don't want to leave Susannah."

"We're not going far and she has a good loud voice. Besides, if there's danger, it's ahead—we'll be between it and her."

Eddie looked down at Susannah.

"Go on—just make sure you're back soon." She looked back the way they had come with thoughtful eyes. "I don't know if there's ha ants here or not, but it feels like there are."

"We'll be back before dark," Roland promised. He started toward the screen of alders, and after a moment, Eddie followed him.

26

FIFTEEN YARDS INTO THE trees, Eddie realized that they were following a path, one the bear had probably made for itself over the years. The alders bent above them in a tunnel. The sounds were louder now, and he began to sort them out. One was a low, deep, humming noise. He could feel it in his feet—a faint vibration, as if some large piece of machinery was running in the earth. Above it, closer and more urgent, were crisscrossing sounds like bright scratches—squeals, squeaks, chitterings.

Roland placed his mouth against Eddie's ear and said, "I think there's little danger if we're quiet."

They moved on another five yards and then Roland stopped again. He drew his gun

and used the barrel to brush aside a branch which hung heavy with sunset-tinted leaves. Eddie looked through this small opening and into the clearing where the bear had lived for so long—the base of operations from which he had set forth on his many expeditions of pillage and terror.

There was no undergrowth here; the ground had been beaten bald long since. A stream emerged from the base of a rock wall about fifty feet high and ran through the arrowhead-shaped clearing. On their side of the stream, backed up against the wall, was a metal box about nine feet high. Its roof was curved, and it reminded Eddie of a subway entrance. The front was painted in diagonal yellow and black stripes. The earth which floored the clearing was not black, like the topsoil in the forest, but a strange powdery gray. It was littered with bones, and after a moment Eddie realized that what he had taken for gray soil was more bones, bones so old they were crumbling back to dust.

Things were moving in the dirt—the things making the squealing, chittering noises. Four . . . no, five of them. Small metal devices, the largest about the size of a Collie pup. They were robots, Eddie realized, or something like robots. They were similar to each other and to the bear they had undoubtedly served in one way only—atop each of them, a tiny radar-dish turned rapidly. More thinking caps, Eddie thought. My God, what kind of world is this, anyway? The largest of these devices looked a little like the Tonka tractor Eddie had gotten for his sixth or seventh birthday; its treads churned up tiny gray clouds of bone-dust as it rolled along. Another looked like a stainless steel rat. A third appeared to be a snake constructed of jointed steel segments—it writhed and humped its way along. They formed a rough circle on the far side of the stream, going around and around on a deep course they had carved in the ground. Looking at them made Eddie think of cartoons he had seen in the stacks of old Saturday Evening Post magazines his mother had for some reason saved and stored in the front hall of their apartment. In the cartoons, worried, cigarette-smoking men paced ruts in the carpet while they waited for their wives to give birth.

As his eyes grew used to the simple geography of the clearing, Eddie saw that there were a great many more than five of these assorted freaks. There were at least a dozen others that he could see and probably more hidden behind the bony remains of the bear's old kills. The difference was that the others weren't moving. The members of the bear's mechanical retinue had died, one by one, over the long years until just this little group of five were left . . . and they did not sound very healthy, with their squeaks and squalls and rusty chitterings. The snake in particular had a hesitant, crippled look as it followed the mechanical rat around and around the circle. Every now and then the device which followed the snake—a steel block that walked on stubby mechanical legs—would catch up with it and give the snake a nudge, as if telling it to hurry the fuck up.

Eddie wondered what their job had been. Surely not protection; the bear had been built to protect itself, and Eddie guessed that if old Shardik had come upon the three of them while still in its prime, it would have chewed them up and spat them out in short order. Perhaps these little robots had been its maintenance crew, or scouts, or messengers. He guessed that they could be dangerous, but only in their own defense . . . or their master's. They did not seem warlike. There was, in fact, something pitiful about them. Most of the crew was now

defunct, their master was gone, and Eddie believed they knew it somehow. It was not menace they projected but a strange, inhuman sadness. Old and almost worn out, they paced and rolled and wriggled their anxious way around the worry-track they had dug in this godforsaken clearing, and it almost seemed to Eddie that he could read the confused run of their thoughts; Oh dear, oh dear, what now? What is our purpose, now that He is gone? And who will take care of us, now that He is gone? Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear . . .

Eddie felt a tug on the back of his leg and came very close to screaming in fear and surprise. He wheeled, cocking Roland's gun, and saw Susannah looking up at him with wide eyes. Eddie let out a long breath and dropped the hammer carefully back to its resting position. He knelt, put his hands on Susannah's shoulders, kissed her cheek, then whispered in her ear: "I came really close to putting a bullet in your silly head—what are you doing here?"

"Wanted to see," she whispered back, looking not even slightly abashed. Her eyes shifted to Roland as he also hunkered beside her. "Besides, it was spooky back there by myself."

She had sustained a number of small scratches crawling after them through the brush, but Roland had to admit to himself that she could be as quiet as a ghost when she wanted to be; he hadn't heard a thing. He took a rag (the last remnant of his old shirt) from his back pocket and wiped the little trickles of blood from her arms. He examined his work for a moment and then dabbed at a small nick on her forehead as well. "Have your look, then," he said. His voice was hardly more than the movement of his lips. "I guess you earned it."

He used one hand to open a sightline at her level in the hock and greenberry bushes, then waited while she stared raptly into the clearing. At last she pulled back and Roland allowed the bushes to close again.

"I feel sorry for them," she whispered. "Isn't that crazy?"

"Not at all," Roland whispered back. "They are creatures of great sadness, I think, in their own strange way. Eddie is going to put them out of their misery."

Eddie began to shake his head at once.

"Yes, you are . . . unless you want to hunker here in what you call 'the toolies' all night. Go for the hats. The little twirling things."

"What if I miss?" Eddie whispered at him furiously.

Roland shrugged.

Eddie stood up and reluctantly cocked the gunslinger's revolver again. He looked through the bushes at the circling servomechanisms, going around and around in their lonely, useless orbit. It'll be like shoot-ing puppies, he thought glumly.

Then he saw one of them—it was the thing that looked like a walking box—extrude an ugly-looking pincer device from its middle and clamp it for a moment on the snake. The snake made a surprised buzzing sound and leaped ahead. The walking box withdrew its pincer.

Well . . . maybe not exactly like shooting puppies, Eddie decided. He glanced at Roland again. Roland looked back expressionlessly, arms folded across his chest. You pick some goddam strange times to keep school, buddy.

Eddie thought of Susannah, first shooting the bear in the ass, then blowing its sensor device to smithereens as it bore down on her and Roland, and felt a little ashamed of himself. And there was more: part of him wanted to go for it, just as part of him had wanted to go up against Balazar and his crew of

plug-uglies in The Leaning Tower. The compulsion was probably sick, but that didn't change its basic attraction: Let's see who walks away . . . let's just see.

Yeah, that was pretty sick, all right.

Pretend it's just a shooting gallery, and you want to win your honey a stuffed dog, he thought. Or a stuffed bear. He drew a bead on the walking box and then looked around impatiently when Roland touched his shoulder.

"Say your lesson, Eddie. And be true."

Eddie hissed impatiently through his teeth, angry at the distraction, but Roland's eyes didn't flinch and so he drew a deep breath and tried to clear everything from his mind: the squeaks and squalls of equipment that had been running too long, the aches and pains in his body, the knowledge that Susannah was here, propped up on the heels of her hands, watching, the further knowledge that she was closest to the ground, and if he missed one of the gadgets out there, she would be the handiest target if it decided to retaliate.

" 'I do not shoot with my hand; he who shoots with his hand has forgotten the face of his father.' "

That was a joke, he thought; he wouldn't know his old man if he passed him on the street. But he could feel the words doing their work, clearing his mind and settling his nerves. He didn't know if he was the stuff of which gunslingers were made—the idea seemed fabulously unlikely to him, even though he knew he had managed to hold up his end pretty well during the shootout at Balazar's nightclub—but he did know that part of him liked the coldness that fell over him when he spoke the words of the old, old catechism the gunslinger had taught them; the coldness and the way things seemed to stand forth with their own breathless clarity. There was another part of him which understood that this was just another deadly drug, not much different from the heroin which had killed Henry and almost killed him, but that did not alter the thin, tight pleasure of the moment. It drummed in him like taut cables vibrating in a high wind.

" 'I do not aim with my hand; he who aims with his hand has forgot-ten the face of his father.

" 'I aim with my eye.

" 'I do not kill with my gun; he who kills with his gun has forgotten the face of his father.' "

Then, without knowing he meant to do it, he stepped out of the trees and spoke to the trundling robots on the far side of the clearing:

" 'I kill with my heart.'"

They stopped their endless circling. One of them let out a high buzz that might have been alarm or a warning. The radar-dishes, each no bigger than half a Hershey bar, turned toward the sound of his voice.

Eddie began to fire.

The sensors exploded like day pigeons, one after the other. Pity was gone from Eddie's heart; there was only that coldness, and the knowledge that he would not stop, could not stop, until the job was done.

Thunder filled the twilight clearing and bounced back from the splint-ery rock wall at its wide end. The steel snake did two cartwheels and lay twitching in the dust. The biggest mechanism—the one that had reminded Eddie of his childhood Tonka tractor—tried to flee. Eddie blew its radar-dish to kingdom come as it made a herky-jerky run at the side of the rut. It fell on its squarish nose with thin blue flames squirting out of the steel sockets which held its glass eyes.

The only sensor he missed was the one on the stainless steel rat; that shot caromed off its metal back with a high mosquito whine. It surged out of the rut, made a half-circle around the box-shaped thing which had been following the snake, and charged across the clearing at surprising speed. It was making an angry clittering sound, and as it closed the distance, Eddie could see it had a mouth lined with long, sharp points. They did not look like teeth; they looked like sewing-machine needles, blurring up and down. No, he guessed these things were really not much like puppies, after all.

"Take it, Roland!" he shouted desperately, but when he snatched a quick look around he saw that Roland was still standing with his arms crossed on his chest, his expression serene and distant. He might have been thinking of chess problems or old love-letters.

The dish on the rat's back suddenly locked down. It changed direction slightly and buzzed straight toward Susannah Dean.

One bullet left, Eddie thought. If I miss, it'll take her face off.

Instead of shooting, he stepped forward and kicked the rat as hard as he could.

He had replaced his shoes with a pair of deerskin moccasins, and he felt the jolt all the way up to his knee. The rat gave a rusty, ratcheting squeal, tumbled over and over in the dirt, and came to rest on its back. Eddie could see what looked like a dozen stubby mechanical legs pistoning up and down. Each was tipped with a sharp steel claw. These claws twirled around and around on gimbals the size of pencil-erasers.

A steel rod poked out of the robot's midsection and flipped the gadget upright again. Eddie brought Roland's revolver down, ignoring a momentary impulse to steady it with his free hand. That might be the way cops in his own world were taught to shoot, but it wasn't the way it was done here. When you forget the gun is there, when it feels like you're shooting with your finger, Roland had told them, then you'll be some-where near home.

Eddie pulled the trigger. The tiny radar-dish, which had begun to turn again in an effort to find the enemies, disappeared in a blue Hash. The rat made a choked noise—Chop!—and fell dead on its side.

Eddie turned with his heart jackhammering in his chest. He couldn't remember being this furious since he realized that Roland meant to keep him in his world until his goddamned Tower was won or lost. . . probably until they were all worm-chow, in other words.

He levelled the empty gun at Roland's heart and spoke in a thick voice he hardly recognized as his own. "If there was a round left in this, you could stop worrying about your fucking Tower right now."

"Stop it, Eddie!" Susannah said sharply.

He looked at her. "It was going for you, Susannah, and it meant to turn you into ground chuck."

"But it didn't get me. You got it, Eddie. You got it."

"No thanks to him." Eddie made as if to re-holster the gun and then realized, to his further disgust, that he had nothing to put it in. Susannah was wearing the holster. "Him and his lessons. Him and his goddam lessons." He turned to Roland. "I tell you, for two cents—"

Roland's mildly interested expression suddenly changed. His eyes shifted to a point over Eddie's left shoulder. "DOWN!" he shouted.

Eddie didn't ask questions. His rage and confusion were wiped from his mind

immediately. He dropped, and as he did, he saw the gunslinger's left hand blur down to his side. My God, he thought, still falling, he CAN'T be that fast, no one can be that fast, I'm not bad but Susannah makes me look slow and he makes Susannah look like a turtle trying to walk uphill on a piece of glass— Something passed just over his head, something that squealed at him in mechanical rage and pulled out a tuft of his hair. Then the gunslinger was shooting from the hip, three fast shots like thunder-cracks, and the squealing stopped. A creature which looked to Eddie like a large mechanical bat thudded to earth between the place where Eddie now lay and the one where Susannah knelt beside Roland. One of its jointed, rust-speckled wings thumped the ground once, weakly, as if angry at the missed chance, and then became still.

Roland crossed to Eddie, walking easy in his old sprung boots. He extended a hand. Eddie took it and let Roland help him to his feet. The wind had been knocked out of him and he found he couldn't talk. Probably just as well . . . seems like every time I open my mouth I stick my goddam foot into it.

"Eddie! You all right?" Susannah was crossing the clearing to where he stood with his head bent and his hands planted on his upper thighs, trying to breathe.

"Yeah." The word came out in a croak. He straightened up with an effort. "Just got a little haircut."

"It was in a tree," Roland said mildly. "I didn't see it myself, at first. The light gets tricky this time of day. He paused and then went on in that same mild voice: "She was never in any danger, Eddie."

Eddie nodded his head. Roland, he now realized, could almost have eaten a hamburger and drunk a milkshake before beginning his draw. He was that fast.

"All right. Let's just say I disapprove of your teaching techniques, okay? I'm not going to apologize, though, so if you're waiting for one, you can stop now."

Roland bent, picked Susannah up, and began to brush her off. He did this with a kind of impartial affection, like a mother brushing off her toddler after she has taken one of her necessary tumbles in the dust of the back yard. "Your apology is not expected or necessary," he said. "Susannah and I had a conversation similar to this one two days ago. Didn't we, Susannah?"

She nodded. "Roland's of the opinion that apprentice gunslingers who won't bite the hand that feeds them from time to time need a good lack in the slats."

Eddie looked around at the wreckage and slowly began to beat the bone-dust out of his pants and shirt. "What if I told you I don't want to be a gunslinger, Roland old buddy?"

"I'd say that what you want doesn't much matter." Roland was looking at the metal kiosk which stood against the rock wall, and seemed to have lost interest in the conversation. Eddie had seen this before. When the conversation turned to questions of should-be, could-be, or oughtta-be, Roland almost always lost interest.

"Ka?" Eddie asked, with a trace of his old bitterness.

"That's right. Ka." Roland walked over to the kiosk and passed a hand along the yellow and black stripes which ran down its front. "We have found one of the twelve portals which ring the edge of the world . . . one of the six paths to the Dark Tower.

"And that is also ka."



EDDIE WENT BACK FOR Susannah's wheelchair. No one had to ask him to do this; he wanted some time alone, to get himself back under control. Now that the shooting was over, every muscle in his body seemed to have picked up its own little thrumming tremor. He did not want either of them to see him this way—not because they might misread it as fear, but because one or both might know it for what it really was: excitement overload. He had liked it. Even when you added in the bat which had almost scalped him, he had liked it.

That's bullshit, buddy. And you know it.

The trouble was, he didn't know it. He had come face to face with something Susannah had found out for herself after shooting the bear: he could talk about how he didn't want to be a gunslinger, how he didn't want to be tramping around this crazy world where the three of them seemed to be the only human life, that what he really wanted more than anything else was to be standing on the corner of Broadway and Forty-second Street, popping his fingers, munching a chili-dog, and listening to Creedence Clearwater Revival blast out of his Walkman earphones as he watched the girls go by, those ultimately sexy New York girls with their pouty go-to-hell mouths and their long legs in short skirts. He could talk about those things until he was blue in the face, but his heart knew other things. It knew that he had enjoyed blowing the electronic menag-erie back to glory, at least while the game was on and Roland's gun was his own private hand-held thunderstorm. He had enjoyed kicking the robot rat, even though it had hurt his foot and even though he had been scared shitless. In some weird way, that part—the being scared part— actually seemed to add to the enjoyment.

All that was bad enough, but his heart knew something even worse: that if a door leading back to New York appeared in front of him right now, he might not walk through it. Not, at least, until he had seen the Dark Tower for himself. He was beginning to believe that Roland's illness was a communicable disease.

As he wrestled Susannah's chair through the tangle of junk-alders, cursing the branches that whipped at his face and tried to poke his eyes out, Eddie found himself able to admit at least some of these things, and the admission cooled his blood a little. / want to see if it looks the way it did in my dream, he thought. To see something like that. . . that would be really fantastic.

And another voice spoke up inside. I'll bet his other friends—the ones with the names that sound like they came straight from the Round Table in King Arthur's court—I'll bet they felt the same way, Eddie. And they're all dead. Every one of them.

He recognized that voice, like it or not. It belonged to Henry, and that made it a hard voice not to hear.

ROLAND, WITH SUSANNAH BALANCED on his right hip, was standing in front of the metal box that looked like a subway entrance closed for the night. Eddie left the wheelchair at the edge of the clearing and walked over. As he did, the steady humming noise and the vibration under his feet became louder. The machinery making the noise, he realized, was either inside the box or under it. It seemed that he heard it not with his ears but somewhere deep inside his head, and in the hollows of his gut.

"So this is one of the twelve portals. Where does it go, Roland? Disney World?"

Roland shook his head. "I don't know where it goes. Maybe nowhere ... or everywhere. There's a lot about my world I don't know—surely you both have realized that. And there are things I used to know which have changed."

"Because the world has moved on?"

"Yes." Roland glanced at him. "Here, that is not a figure of speech. The world really is moving on, and it goes ever faster. At the same time, things are wearing out . . . falling apart . . ." He kicked the mechanical corpse of the walking box to illustrate his point.

Eddie thought of the rough diagram of the portals which Roland had drawn in the dirt. "Is this the edge of the world?" he asked, almost timidly. "I mean, it doesn't look much different than anyplace else." He laughed a little. "If there's a drop-off, I don't see it."

Roland shook his head. "It's not that kind of edge. It's the place where one of the Beams starts. Or so I was taught."

"Beams?" Susannah asked. "What Beams?"

"The Great Old Ones didn't make the world, but they did re-make it. Some tale-tellers say the Beams saved it; others say they are the seeds of the world's destruction. The Great Old Ones created the Beams. They are lines of some sort... lines which bind . . . and hold . . ."

"Are you talking about magnetism?" Susannah asked cautiously.

His whole face lit up, transforming its harsh planes and furrows into something new and amazing, and for a moment Eddie knew how Roland would look if he actually did reach his Tower.

"Yes! Not just magnetism, but that is a part of it ... and gravity . . . and the proper alignment of space, size, and dimension. The Beams are the forces which bind these things together."

"Welcome to physics in the nuthouse," Eddie said in a low voice.

Susannah ignored this. "And the Dark Tower? Is it some kind of generator? A central power-source for these Beams?"

"I don't know."

"But you do know that this is point A," Eddie said. "If we walked long enough in a straight line, we'd come to another portal—call it point C—on the other edge of the world. But before we did, we'd come to point B. The center-point. The Dark Tower."

The gunslinger nodded.

"How long a trip is it? Do you know?"

"No. But I know it's very far, and that the distance grows with every day that passes."

Eddie had bent to examine the walking box. Now he straightened up and stared at Roland. "That can't be." He sounded like a man trying to explain to a small child that there really isn't a boogeyman living in his closet, that there can't be because there isn't any such thing as the boogeyman, not really. "Worlds don't grow, Roland."

"Don't they? When I was a boy, Eddie, there were maps. I remember one in particular. It was called The Greater Kingdoms of the Western Earth. It showed my land, which was called by the name Gilead. It showed the Downland Baronies, which were overrun by riot and civil war in the year after I won my guns, and the hills, and the desert, and the mountains, and the Western Sea. It was a long

distance from Gilead to the Western Sea—a thousand miles or more—but it had taken me over twenty years to cross that distance."

"That's impossible," Susannah said quickly, fearfully. "Even if you walked the whole distance it couldn't take twenty years."

"Well, you have to allow for stops to write postcards and drink beer," Eddie said, but they both ignored him.

"I didn't walk but rode most of the distance on horseback," Roland said. "I was—slowed up, shall we say?—every now and then, but for most of that time I was moving. Moving away from John Farson, who led the revolt which toppled the world I grew up in and who wanted my head on a pole in his courtyard—he had good reason to want that, I suppose, since I and my compatriots were responsible for the deaths of a great many of his followers—and because I stole something he held very dear."

"What, Roland?" Eddie asked curiously.

Roland shook his head. "That's a story for another day ... or maybe never. For now, think not of that but of this: I've come many thousands of miles. Because the world is growing."

"A thing like that just can't happen," Eddie reiterated, but he was badly shaken, all the same. "There'd be earthquakes . . . floods . . . tidal waves ... I don't know what all ..."

"Look!" Roland said furiously. "Just look around you! What do you see? A world that is slowing down like a child's top even as it speeds up and moves on in some other way none of us understand. Look at your kills, Eddie! Look at your kills, for your father's sake!"

He took two strides toward the stream, picked up the steel snake, examined it briefly, and tossed it to Eddie, who caught it with his left hand. The snake broke in two pieces as he did so.

"You see? It's exhausted. All the creatures we found here were exhausted. If we hadn't come, they would have died before long, anyway. Just as the bear would have died."

"The bear had some sort of disease," Susannah said.

The gunslinger nodded. "Parasites which attacked the natural parts of its body. But why did they never attack it before?"

Susannah did not reply.

Eddie was examining the snake. Unlike the bear, it appeared to be a totally artificial construction, a thing of metal, circuits, and yards (or maybe miles) of gossamer-thin wire. Yet he could see flecks of rust, not just on the surface of the half-snake he still held, but in its guts as well. And there was a patch of wetness where either oil had leaked out or water had seeped in. This moisture had rotted away some of the wires, and a greenish stuff that looked like moss had grown over several of the thumbnail-sized circuit boards.

Eddie turned the snake over. A steel plate proclaimed it to be the work of North Central Positronics, Ltd. There was a serial number, but no name. Probably too unimportant to name, he thought. Just a sophisticated mechanical Roto-Rooter designed to give old Br'er Bear an enema every once in a while, keep him regular, or something equally disgusting.

He dropped the snake and wiped his hands on his pants.

Roland had picked up the tractor-gadget. He yanked at one of the treads. It came off easily, showering a cloud of rust down between his boots. He tossed it

aside.

"Everything in the world is either coming to rest or falling to pieces," he said flatly. "At the same time, the forces which interlock and give the world its coherence—in time and size as well as in space—are weakening. We knew that even as children, but we had no idea what the time of the end would be like. How could we? Yet now I am living in those times, and I don't believe they affect my world alone. They affect yours, Eddie and Susannah; they may affect a billion others. The Beams are breaking down. I don't know if that's a cause or only another symptom, but I know it's true. Come! Draw close! Listen!"

As Eddie approached the metal box with its alternating diagonal slashes of yellow and black, a strong and unpleasant memory seized him—for the first time in years he found himself thinking of a crumbling Victorian wreck in Dutch Hill, about a mile away from the neighborhood he and Henry had grown up. This wreck, which was known as The Mansion to the neighborhood kids, occupied a plot of weedy, untended lawn on Rhinehold Street. Eddie guessed that practically all the kids in the borough had heard spooky stories about The Mansion. The house stood slumped beneath its steep roofs, seeming to glare at passersby from the deep shadows thrown by its eaves. The windows were gone, of course—kids can throw rocks through windows without getting too close to a place—hut it had not been spray-painted, and it had not become a make-out spot or a shooting gallery. Oddest of all was the simple fact of its continued existence: no one had set it on fire to collect the insurance or just to see it bum. The kids said it was haunted, of course, and as Eddie stood on the sidewalk with Henry one day, looking at it (they had made the pilgrimage specifically to see this object of fabulous rumor, although Henry had told their mother they were only going for Hoodsie Rockets at Dahlberg's with some of his friends), it had seemed that it really might be haunted. Hadn't he felt some strong and unfriendly force seeping from that old Victorian's shadowy windows, windows that seemed to look at him with the fixed stare of a dangerous lunatic? Hadn't he felt some subtle wind stirring the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck? Hadn't he had the clear intuition that if he stepped inside that place, the door would slam and lock behind him and the walls would begin to close in, grinding the bones of dead mice to powder, wanting to crush his bones the same way?

Haunting. Haunted.

He felt that same old sense of mystery and danger now, as he approached the metal box. Gooseflesh began to ripple up his legs and down his arms; the hair on the back of his neck bushed out and became rough, overlapping hackles. He felt that same subtle wind blowing past him, although the leaves on the trees which ringed the clearing were perfectly still.

Yet he walked toward the door anyway (for that was what it was, of course, another door, although this one was locked and always would be against the likes of him), not stopping until his ear was pressed against it.

It was as if he had dropped a tab of really strong acid half an hour ago and it was just beginning to come on heavy. Strange colors flowed across the darkness behind his eyeballs. He seemed to hear voices mur-muring up to him from long hallways like stone throats, halls which were lit with guttering electric torches. Once these flambeaux of the modern age had thrown a bright glare across everything, but now they were only sullen cores of blue light. He sensed emptiness . . . desertion . . . desola-tion . . . death.

The machinery rumbled on and on, but wasn't there a rough under-tone to the sound? A land of desperate thudding beneath the hum, like the arrhythmia of a diseased heart? A feeling that the machinery produc-ing this sound, although far more sophisticated even than that within the bear had been, was somehow falling out of tune with itself?

"All is silent in the halls of the dead," Eddie heard himself whisper in a falling, fainting voice. "All is forgotten in the stone halls of the dead.

Behold the stairways which stand in darkness; behold the rooms of ruin.

These are the halls of the dead where the spiders spin and the great circuits tall quiet, one by one."

Roland pulled him roughly back, and Eddie looked at him with dazed eyes.

"That's enough," Roland said.

"Whatever they put in there isn't doing so well, is it?" Eddie heard himself ask. His trembling voice seemed to come from far away. He could still feel the power coming out of that box. It called to him.

"No. Nothing in my world is doing so well these days."

"If you boys are planning to camp here for the night, you'll have to do without the pleasure of my company," Susannah said. Her face was a white blur in the ashy aftermath of twilight. "I'm going over yonder. I don't like the way that thing makes me feel."

"We'll all camp over yonder," Roland said. "Let's go."

"What a good idea," Eddie said. As they moved away from the box, the sound of the machinery began to dim. Eddie felt its hold on him weakening, although it still called to him, invited him to explore the half-lit hallways, the standing stairways, the rooms of ruin where the spiders spun and the control panels were going dark, one by one.

29

IN HIS DREAM THAT night, Eddie again went walking down Second Ave-nue toward Tom and Gerry's Artistic Deli on the corner of Second and Forty-sixth. He passed a record store and the Rolling Stones boomed from the speakers:

"I see a red door and I want to paint it black,  
No colours anymore, I want them to turn black,  
I see the girls walk by dressed in their summer clothes,  
I have to turn my head until my darkness goes ..."

He walked on, passing a store called Reflections of You between Forty-ninth and Forty-eighth. He saw himself in one of the mirrors hang-ing in the display window. He thought he looked better than he had in years—hair a little too long, but otherwise tanned and fit. The clothes, though . . . uh-uh, man. Square-bear shit all the way. Blue blazer, white shirt, dark red tie, gray dress pants ... he had never owned a yuppie-from-hell outfit like that in his life.

Someone was shaking him.

Eddie tried to burrow deeper into the dream. He didn't want to wake up now. Not before he got to the deli and used his key to go through the door and into the field of roses. He wanted to see it all again—the endless blanket of red, the overarching blue sky where those great white cloud-ships sailed, and the Dark

Tower. He was afraid of the darkness which lived within that eldritch column, waiting to eat anyone who got too close, but he wanted to see it again just the same. Needed to see it.

The hand, however, would not stop shaking. The dream began to darken, and the smells of car exhaust along Second Avenue became the smell of woodsmoke—thin now, because the fire was almost out.

It was Susannah. She looked scared. Eddie sat up and put an arm around her. They had camped on the far side of the alder grove, within earshot of the stream babbling through the bone-littered clearing. On the other side of the glowing embers which had been their campfire, Roland lay asleep. His sleep was not easy. He had cast aside his single blanket and lay with his knees drawn up almost to his chest. With his boots off, his feet looked white and narrow and defenseless. The great toe of the right foot was gone, victim of the lobster-thing which had also snatched away part of his right hand.

He was moaning some slurred phrase over and over again. After a few repetitions, Eddie realized it was the phrase he had spoken before keeling over in the clearing where Susannah had shot the bear: Go, then—there are other worlds than these. He would fall silent for a moment, then call out the boy's name: "Jake! Where are you? Jake!"

The desolation and despair in his voice filled Eddie with horror. His arms stole around Susannah and he pulled her tight against him. He could feel her shivering, although the night was warm.

The gunslinger rolled over. Starlight fell into his open eyes.

"Jake, where are you?" he called to the night. "Come back!"

"Oh Jesus—he's off again. What should we do, Suze?"

"I don't know. I just knew I couldn't listen to it anymore by myself. He sounds so far away. So far away from everything."

"Go, then," the gunslinger murmured, rolling back onto his side and drawing his knees up once more, "there are other worlds than these." He was silent for a moment. Then his chest hitched and he loosed the boy's name in a long, bloodcurdling cry. In the woods behind them, some large bird flew away in a dry whirr of wings toward some less exciting part of the world.

"Do you have any ideas?" Susannah asked. Her eyes were wide and wet with tears.

"Maybe we should wake him up?"

"I don't know." Eddie saw the gunslinger's revolver, the one he wore on his left hip. It had been placed, in its holster, on a neatly folded square of hide within easy reach of the place where Roland lay. "I don't think I dare," he added at last.

"It's driving him crazy."

Eddie nodded.

"What do we do about it? Eddie, what do we do?"

Eddie didn't know. An antibiotic had stopped the infection caused by the bite of the lobster-thing; now Roland was burning with infection again, but Eddie didn't think there was an antibiotic in the world that would cure what was wrong with him this time.

"I don't know. Lie down with me, Suze."

Eddie threw a hide over both of them, and after a while her trembling quieted.

"If he goes insane, he may hurt us," she said.

"Don't I know it." This unpleasant idea had occurred to him in terms of the

bear—its red, hate-filled eyes (and had there not been bewilderment as well, lurking deep in those red depths?) and its deadly slashing claws. Eddie's eyes moved to the revolver, lying so close to the gunslinger's good left hand, and he remembered again how fast Roland had been when he'd seen the mechanical bat swooping down toward them. So fast his hand had seemed to disappear. If the gunslinger went mad, and if he and Susannah became the focus of that madness, they would have no chance. No chance at all.

He pressed his face into the warm hollow of Susannah's neck and closed his eyes. Not long after, Roland ceased his babbling. Eddie raised his head and looked over. The gunslinger appeared to be sleeping naturally again. Eddie looked at Susannah and saw that she had also gone to sleep. He lay down beside her, gently kissed the swell of her breast, and closed his own eyes.

Not you, buddy; you're gonna be awake a long, long time.

But they had been on the move for two days and Eddie was bone-tired. He drifted off ... drifted down.

Back to the dream, he thought as he went. I want to go back to Second Avenue . . . back to Tom and Gerry's. That's what I want.

The dream did not return that night, however.

30

THEY ATE A QUICK breakfast as the sun came up, repacked and redistributed the gear, and then returned to the wedge-shaped clearing. It didn't look quite so spooky in the clear light of morning, but all three of them were still at pains to keep well away from the metal box with its warning slashes of black and yellow. If Roland had any recollection of the bad dreams which had haunted him in the night, he gave no sign. He had gone about the morning chores as he always did, in thoughtful, stolid silence.

"How do you plan to keep to a straight-line course from here?" Susannah asked the gunslinger.

"If the legends are right, that should be no problem. Do you remember when you asked about magnetism?"

She nodded.

He rummaged deep into his purse and at last emerged with a small square of old, supple leather. Threaded through it was a long silver needle.

"A compass!" Eddie said. "You really are an Eagle Scout!"

Roland shook his head. "Not a compass. I know what they are, of course, but these days I keep my directions by the sun and stars, and even now they serve me quite well."

"Even now?" Susannah asked, a trifle uneasily.

He nodded. "The directions of the world are also in drift."

"Christ," Eddie said. He tried to imagine a world where true north was slipping slyly off to the east or west and gave up almost at once. It made him feel a little ill; the way looking down from the top of a high building had always made him feel a little ill.

"This is just a needle, but it is steel and it should serve our purpose as well as a compass. The Beam is our course now, and the needle will show it." He rummaged in his purse again and came out with a poorly made pottery cup. A crack ran down one side. Roland had mended this artifact, which he had found at the

old campsite, with pine-gum. Now he went to the stream, dipped the cup into it, and brought it back to where Susannah sat in her wheelchair. He put the cup down carefully on the wheelchair's arm, and when the surface of the water inside was calm, he dropped the needle in. It sank to the bottom and rested there.

"Wow!" Eddie said. "Great! I'd fall at your feet in wonder, Roland, but I don't want to spoil the crease in my pants."

"I'm not finished. Hold the cup steady, Susannah."

She did, and Roland pushed her slowly across the clearing. When she was about twelve feet in front of the door, he turned the chair carefully so she was facing away from it.

"Eddie!" she cried. "Look at this!"

He bent over the pottery cup, marginally aware that water was already oozing through Roland's makeshift seal. The needle was rising slowly to the surface. It reached it and bobbed there as serenely as a cork would have done. Its direction lay in a straight line from the portal behind them and into the old, tangled forest ahead. "Holy shit—a floating needle. Now I really have seen everything."

"Hold the cup, Susannah."

She held it steady as Roland pushed the wheelchair further into the clearing, at right angles to the box. The needle lost its steady point, bobbed randomly for a moment, then sank to the bottom of the cup again. When Roland pulled the chair backward to its former spot, it rose once more and pointed the way.

"If we had iron filings and a sheet of paper," the gunslinger said, "we could scatter the filings on the paper's surface and watch them draw together into a line which would point that same course."

"Will that happen even when we leave the Portal?" Eddie asked.

Roland nodded. "Nor is that all. We can actually see the Beam."

Susannah looked over her shoulder. Her elbow bumped the cup a little as she did. The needle swung aimlessly as the water inside sloshed . . . and then settled firmly back in its original direction.

"Not that way," Roland said. "Look down, both of you—Eddie at your feet, Susannah into your lap."

They did as he asked.

"When I tell you to look up, look straight ahead, in the direction the needle points. Don't look at any one thing; let your eye see whatever it will. Now—look up!"

They did. For a moment Eddie saw nothing but the woods. He tried to make his eyes relax . . . and suddenly it was there, the way the shape of the slingshot had been there, inside the knob of wood, and he knew why Roland had told them not to look at any one thing. The effect of the Beam was everywhere along its course, but it was subtle. The needles of the pines and spruces pointed that way. The greenberry bushes grew slightly slanted, and the slant lay in the direction of the Beam. Not all the trees the bear had pushed down to clear its sightlines had fallen along that camouflaged path—which ran southeast, if Eddie had his directions right—but most had, as if the force coming out of the box had pushed them that way as they tottered. The clearest evidence was in the way the shadows lay on the ground. With the sun coming up in the east they all pointed west, of course, but as Eddie looked southeast, he saw a rough herringbone pattern that existed only along the line which the needle in the cup had pointed out.



"I might see something" Susannah said doubtfully, "but—"

"Look at the shadows! The shadows, Suze!"

Eddie saw her eyes widen as it all fell into place for her. "My God! It's there! Right there! It's like when someone has a natural part in their hair!"

Now that Eddie had seen it, he could not unsee it; a dim aisle driving through the untidy tangle which surrounded the clearing, a straight-edge course that was the way of the Beam. He was suddenly aware of how huge the force flowing around him (and probably right through him, like X-rays) must be, and had to control an urge to step away, either to the right or left. "Say, Roland, this won't make me sterile, will it?"

Roland shrugged, smiling faintly.

"It's like a riverbed," Susannah marvelled. "A riverbed so over-grown you can barely see it ... but it's still there. The pattern of shadows will never change as long as we stay inside the path of the Beam, will it?"

"No," Roland said. "They'll change direction as the sun moves across the sky, of course, but we'll always be able to see the course of the Beam. You must remember that it has been flowing along this same path for thousands—perhaps tens of thousands—of years. Look up, you two, into the sky!"

They did, and saw that the thin cirrus clouds had also picked up that herringbone pattern along the course of the Beam . . . and those clouds within the alley of its power were flowing faster than those to either side. They were being pushed southeast. Being pushed in the direction of the Dark Tower.

"You see? Even the clouds must obey."

A small flock of birds coursed toward them. As they reached the path of the Beam, they were all deflected toward the southeast for a moment. Although Eddie clearly saw this happen, his eyes could hardly credit it. When the birds had crossed the narrow corridor of the Beam's influence, they resumed their former course.

"Well," Eddie said, "I suppose we ought to get going. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and all that shit."

"Wait a minute." Susannah was looking at Roland. "It isn't just a thousand miles, is it? Not anymore. How far are we talking about, Roland? Five thousand miles? Ten?"

"I can't say. It will be very far."

"Well, how in the hell we ever goan get there, with you two pushing me in this goddam wheelchair? We'll be lucky to make three miles a day through yonder Drawers, and you know it."

"The way has been opened," Roland said patiently, "and that's enough for now. The time may come, Susannah Dean, when we travel faster than you would like."

"Oh yeah?" She looked at him truculently, and both men could see Detta Walker dancing a dangerous hornpipe in her eyes again. "You got a race-car lined up? If you do, it might be nice if we had a damn road to run it on!"

"The land and the way we travel on it will change. It always does."

Susannah flapped a hand at the gunslinger; go on with you, it said. "You sound like my old mamma, sayin God will provide."

"Hasn't He?" Roland asked gravely.

She looked at him for a moment in silent surprise, then threw her head back and laughed at the sky. "Wt-11, I guess that depends on how you look at it. All I can say is that if this is providin, Roland, I'd hate to see what'd happen if He

decided to let us go hungry."

"Come on, let's do it," Eddie said. "I want to get out of this place. I don't like it." And that was true, but that wasn't all. He also felt a deep eagerness to set his feet upon that concealed path, that highway in hiding. Every step was a step closer to the field of roses and the Tower which dominated it. He realized—not without some wonder—that he meant to see that Tower ... or die trying.

Congratulations, Roland, he thought. You've done it. I'm one of the converted. Someone say hallelujah.

"There's one other thing before we go." Roland bent and untied the rawhide lace around his left thigh. Then he slowly began to unbuckle his gunbelt.

"What's this jive?" Eddie asked.

Roland pulled the gunbelt free and held it out to him. "You know why I'm doing this," he said calmly.

"Put it back on, man!" Eddie felt a terrible stew of conflicting emotions roiling inside him; could feel his fingers trembling even inside his clenched fists. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Losing my mind an inch at a time. Until the wound inside me closes—if it ever does—I am not fit to wear this. And you know it."

"Take it, Eddie," Susannah said quietly.

"If you hadn't been wearing this goddamn thing last night, when that bat came at me, I'd be gone from the nose up this morning!"

The gunslinger replied by continuing to hold his remaining gun out to Eddie. The posture of his body said he was prepared to stand that way all day, if that was what it took.

"All right!" Eddie cried. "Goddammit, all right!"

He snatched the gunbelt from Roland's hand and buckled it about his own waist in a series of rough gestures. He should have been relieved, he supposed—hadn't he looked at this gun, lying so close to Roland's hand in the middle of the night, and thought about what might happen if Roland really did go over the high side? Hadn't he and Susannah both thought about it? But there was no relief. Only fear and guilt and a strange, aching sadness far too deep for tears.

He looked so strange without his guns.

So wrong.

"Okay? Now that the numb-fuck apprentices have the guns and the master's unarmed, can we please go? If something big comes out of the bush at us, Roland, you can always throw your knife at it."

"Oh, that," he murmured. "I almost forgot." He took the knife from his purse and held it out, hilt first, to Eddie.

"This is ridiculous!" Eddie shouted.

"Life is ridiculous."

"Yeah, put it on a postcard and send it to the fucking Reader's Digest." Eddie jammed the knife into his belt and then looked defiantly at Roland. "Now can we go?"

"There is one more thing," Roland said.

"Weeping, creeping Jesus!"

The smile touched Roland's mouth again. "Just joking," he said.

Eddie's mouth dropped open. Beside him, Susannah began to laugh again. The sound rose, as musical as bells, in the morning stillness.

IT TOOK THEM MOST of the morning to clear the zone of destruction with which the great bear had protected itself, but the going was a little easier along the path of the Beam, and once they had put the deadfalls and tangles of underbrush behind them, deep forest took over again and they were able to move at better speed. The brook which had emerged from the rock wall in the clearing ran busily along to their right. It had been joined by several smaller streamlets, and its sound was deeper now. There were more animals here—they heard them moving through the woods, going about their daily round—and twice they saw small groups of deer. One of them, a buck with a noble rack of antlers on its upraised and questioning head, looked to be at least three hundred pounds. The brook bent away from their path as they began to climb again. And, as the afternoon began to slant down toward evening, Eddie saw something.

"Could we stop here? Rest a minute?"

"What is it?" Susannah asked.

"Yes," Roland said. "We can stop."

Suddenly Eddie felt Henry's presence again, like a weight settling on his shoulders. Oh lookit the sissy. Does the sissy see something in the twee? Does the sissy want to carve something? Does he? Ohhhh, ain't that CUTE?

"We don't have to stop. I mean, no big deal. I just—"

"—saw something," Roland finished for him. "Whatever it is, stop running your everlasting mouth and get it."

"It's really nothing." Eddie felt warm blood mount into his face. He tried to look away from the ash tree which had caught his eye.

"But it is. It's something you need, and that's a long way from nothing. If you need it, Eddie, we need it. What we don't need is a man who can't let go of the useless baggage of his memories."

The warm blood turned hot. Eddie stood with his flaming face pointed at his moccasins for a moment longer, feeling as if Roland had looked directly into his confused heart with his faded blue bombardier's eyes.

"Eddie?" Susannah asked curiously. "What is it, dear?"

Her voice gave him the courage he needed. He walked to the slim, straight ash, pulling Roland's knife from his belt.

"Maybe nothing," he muttered, and then forced himself to add: "Maybe a lot. If I don't fuck it up, maybe quite a lot."

"The ash is a noble tree, and full of power," Roland remarked from behind him, but Eddie barely heard. Henry's sneering, hectoring voice was gone; his shame was gone with it. He thought only of the one branch that had caught his eye. It thickened and bulged slightly as it ran into the trunk. It was this oddly shaped thickness that Eddie wanted.

He thought the shape of the key was buried within it—the key he had seen briefly in the fire before the burning remains of the jawbone had changed again and the rose had appeared. Three inverted V's, the center V both deeper and wider than the other two. And the little s-shape at the end. That was the secret.

A breath of his dream recurred: Dad-a-chum, dud-a-chee, not to worry, you've got the key.

Maybe, he thought. But this time I'll have to get all of it. I think that this

time ninety per cent just won't do.

Working with great care, he cut the branch from the tree and then trimmed the narrow end. He was left with a fat chunk of ash about nine inches long. It felt heavy and vital in his hand, very much alive and willing enough to give up its secret shape ... to a man skillful enough to tease it out, that was.

Was he that man? And did it matter?

Eddie Dean thought the answer to both questions was yes.

The gunslinger's good left hand closed over Eddie's right hand. "I think you know a secret."

"Maybe I do."

"Can you tell?"

He shook his head. "Better not to, I think. Not yet."

Roland thought this over, then nodded. "All right. I want to ask you one question, and then we'll drop the subject. Have you perhaps seen some way into the heart of my . . . my problem?"

Eddie thought: And that's as close as he'll ever come to showing the desperation that's eating him alive.

"I don't know. Right now I can't tell for sure. But I hope so, man. I really, really do."

Roland nodded again and released Eddie's hand. "I thank you. We still have two hours of good daylight—why don't we make use of them?"

"Fine by me."

They moved on. Roland pushed Susannah and Eddie walked ahead of them, holding the chunk of wood with the key buried in it. It seemed to throb with its own warmth, secret and powerful.

32

THAT NIGHT, AFTER SUPPER was eaten, Eddie took the gunslinger's knife from his belt and began to carve. The knife was amazingly sharp, and seemed never to lose its edge. Eddie worked slowly and carefully in the firelight, turning the chunk of ash this way and that in his hands, watching the curls of fine-grained wood rise ahead of his long, sure strokes.

Susannah lay down, laced her hands behind her head, and looked Up at the stars wheeling slowly across the black sky.

At the edge of the campsite, Roland stood beyond the glow of the fire and listened as the voices of madness rose once more in his aching, confused mind.

There was a boy.

There was no boy.

Was.

Wasn't.

Was—

He closed his eyes, cupped his aching forehead in one cold hand, and wondered how long it would be until he simply snapped like an overwound bowstring.

Oh Jake, he thought. Where are you? Where are you?

And above the three of them, Old Star and Old Mother rose into their appointed places and stared at each other across the starry ruins of their ancient broken marriage.

## II • KEY AND ROSE

### II KEY AND ROSE

1

FOR THREE WEEKS JOHN "Jake" Chambers fought bravely against the madness rising inside him. During that time he felt like the last man aboard a foundering ocean liner, working the bilge-pumps for dear life, trying to keep the ship afloat until the storm ended, the skies cleared, and help could arrive . . . help from somewhere. Help from anywhere. On May 31st, 1977, four days before school ended for the summer, he finally faced up to the fact that no help was going to come. It was time to give up; time to let the storm carry him away.

The straw that broke the camel's back was his Final Essay in English Comp. John Chambers, who was Jake to the three or four boys who were almost his friends (if his father had known this little factoid, he undoubtedly would have hit the roof), was finishing his first year at The Piper School. Although he was eleven and in the sixth grade, he was small for his age, and people meeting him for the first time often thought he was much younger. In fact, he had sometimes been mistaken for a girl until a year or so ago, when he had made such a fuss about having his hair cut short that his mother had finally relented and allowed it. With his father, of course, there had been no problem about the haircut. His

father had just grinned his hard, stainless steel grin and said, The kid wants to look like a Marine, Laurie. Good for him.

To his father, he was never Jake and rarely John. To his father, he was usually just "the kid."

The Piper School, his father had explained to him the summer before (the Bicentennial Summer, that had been—all bunting and flags and New York Harbor filled with Tall Ships), was, quite simply, The Best Damned School In The Country For A Boy Your Age. The fact that Jake had been accepted there had nothing to do with money, Elmer Chambers explained . . . almost insisted. He had been savagely proud of this fact, although, even at ten, Jake had suspected it might not be a true fact, that it might really be a bunch of bullshit his father had turned into a fact so he could casually drop it into the conversation at lunch or over cocktails: My kid? Oh, he's going to Piper. Best Damned School In The Country For A Boy His Age. Money won't buy you into that school, you know; for Piper, it's brains or nothing.

Jake was perfectly aware that in the fierce furnace of Elmer Chambers's mind, the gross carbon of wish and opinion was often blasted into the hard diamonds which he called facts. . . . or, in more informal circumstances, "factoids." His favorite phrase, spoken often and with reverence, was the fact is, and he used it every chance he got.

The fact is, money doesn't get anyone into The Piper School, his father had told him during that Bicentennial Summer, the summer of blue skies and bunting and Tall Ships, a summer which seemed golden in Jake's memory because he had not yet begun to lose his mind and all he had to worry about was whether or not he could cut the mustard at The Piper School, which sounded like a nest for newly hatched geniuses. The only thing that gets you into a place like Piper is what you've got up here. Elmer Chambers had reached over his desk and tapped the center of his son's forehead with a hard, nicotine-stained finger. Get me, kid? Jake had nodded. It wasn't necessary to talk to his father, because his father treated everyone—including his wife—the way he treated his underlings at the TV network where he was in charge of programming and an acknowledged master of The Kill. All you had to do was listen, nod in the right places, and after a while he let you go.

Good, his father said, lighting one of the eighty Camel cigarettes he smoked each and every day. We understand each other, then. You're going to have to work your buttsky off, but you can cut it. They never would have sent us this if you couldn't. He picked up the letter of acceptance from The Piper School and rattled it. There was a kind of savage triumph in the gesture, as if the letter was an animal he had killed in the jungle, an animal he would now skin and eat. So work hard. Make your grades. Make your mother and me proud of you. If you end the year with an A average in your courses. there's a trip to Disney World in it for you. That's something to shoot for, right, kiddo?

Jake had made his grades—A's in everything (until the last three weeks, that was). He had, presumably, made his mother and father proud of him, although they were around so little that it was hard to tell. Usually there was nobody around when he came home from school except for Greta Shaw—the housekeeper—and so he ended up showing his A papers to her. After that, they migrated to a dark corner of his room. Sometimes Jake looked through them and wondered if they meant any-thing. He wanted them to, but he had serious doubts.

Jake didn't think he would be going to Disney World this summer, A average or no A average.

He thought the nuthouse was a much better possibility.

As he walked in through the double doors of The Piper School at 8:45 on the morning of May 31st, a terrible vision came to him. He saw his father in his office at 70 Rockefeller Plaza, leaning over his desk with a Camel jutting from the corner of his mouth, talking to one of his underlings as blue smoke wreathed his head. All of New York was spread out behind and below his father, its thump and hustle silenced by two layers of Thermopane glass.

The fact is, money doesn't get anyone into Sunnyvale Sanitarium, his father was telling the underling in a tone of grim satisfaction. He reached out and tapped the underling's forehead. The only thing that gets you into a place like that is when something big-time goes wrong up here in the attic. That's what happened to the kid. But he's working his goddam buttsky off. Makes the best fucking baskets in the place, they tell me. And when they let him out—if they ever do—there's a trip in it for him. A trip to—

"—the way station," Jake muttered, then touched his forehead with a hand that wanted to tremble. The voices were coming back. The yelling, conflicting voices which were driving him mad.

You're dead, Jake. You were run over by a car and you're dead.

Don't be stupid! Look—see that poster? REMEMBER THE CLASS ONE PICNIC, it says.

Do you think they have Class Picnics in the afterlife?

I don't know. But I know you were run over by a car.

No!

Yes. It happened on May 9th, at 8:25 AM You died less than a minute later.

No! No! No!

"John?"

He looked around, badly startled. Mr. Bisette, his French teacher, was standing there, looking a little concerned. Behind him, the rest of the student body was streaming into the Common Room for the morning assembly. There was very little skylarking, and no yelling at all. Presumably these other students, like Jake himself, had been told by their parents how lucky they were to be attending Piper, where money didn't matter (although tuition was \$22,000 a year), only your brains. Presumably many of them had been promised trips this summer if their grades were good enough. Presumably the parents of the lucky trip-winners would even go along in some cases. Presumably—

"John, are you okay?" Mr. Bisette asked.

"Sure," Jake said. "Fine. I overslept a little this morning. Not awake yet, I guess."

Mr. Bisette's face relaxed and he smiled. "Happens to the best of us."

Not to my dad. The master of The Kill never oversleeps.

"Are you ready for your French final?" Mr. Bisette asked. "Voulez-vous faire l'examen cet apres-midi?"

"I think so," Jake said. In truth he didn't know if he was ready for the exam or not. He couldn't even remember if he had studied for the French final or not.

These days nothing seemed to matter much except for the voices in his head.

"I want to tell you again how much I enjoyed having you this year, John. I wanted to tell your folks, too, but they missed Parents' Night—"

"They're pretty busy," Jake said.

Mr. Bissette nodded. "Well, I have enjoyed you. I just wanted to say so ... and that I'm looking forward to having you back for French II next year."

"Thanks," Jake said, and wondered what Mr. Bissette would say if he added, But I don't think I'll be taking French II next year, unless I can get a correspondence course delivered to my postal box at good old Sunnyvale.

Joanne Franks, the school secretary, appeared in the doorway of the Common Room with her small silver-plated bell in her hand. At The Piper School, all bells were rung by hand. Jake supposed that if you were a parent, that was one of its charms. Memories of the Little Red Schoolhouse and all that. He hated it himself. The sound of that bell seemed to go right through his head—I can't hold on much longer, he thought despairingly. I'm sorry, but I'm losing it. I'm really, really losing it.

Mr. Bissette had caught sight of Ms. Franks. He turned away, then turned back again. "Is everything all right, John? You've seemed preoccupied these last few weeks. Troubled. Is something on your mind?"

Jake was almost undone by the kindness in Mr. Bissette's voice, but then he imagined how Mr. Bissette would look if he said: Yes. Something is on my mind.

One hell of a nasty little factoid. I died, you see, and I went into another world. And then I died again. You're going to say that stuff like that doesn't happen, and of course you're right, and part of my mind knows you're right, but most of my mind knows that you're wrong. It did happen. I did die.

If he said something like that, Mr. Bissette would be on the phone to Elmer Chambers at once, and Jake thought that Sunnyvale Sanitarium would probably look like a rest-cure after all the stuff his father would have to say on the subject of lads who started having crazy notions just before Finals Week. Kids who did things that couldn't be discussed over lunch or cocktails. Kids Who Let Down The Side.

Jake forced himself to smile at Mr. Bissette. "I'm a little worried about exams, that's all."

Mr. Bissette winked. "You'll do fine."

Ms. Franks began to ring the Assembly Bell. Each peal stabbed into Jake's ears and then seemed to flash across his brain like a small rocket.

"Come on," Mr. Bissette said. "We'll be late. Can't be late on the first day of Finals Week, can we?"

They went in past Ms. Franks and her clashing bell. Mr. Bissette headed toward the row of seats called Faculty Choir. There were lots of cute names like that at Piper School; the auditorium was the Com-mon Room, lunch-hour was Outs, seventh- and eighth-graders were Upper Boys and Girls, and, of course, the folding chairs over by the piano (which Ms. Franks would soon begin to pound as mercilessly as she rang her silver bell) was Faculty Choir. All part of the tradition, Jake supposed. If you were a parent who knew your kid had Outs in the Common Room at noon instead of just slopping up Tuna Surprise in the caff, you relaxed into the assurance that everything was A-OK in the education department. He slipped into a seat at the rear of the room and let the morn-ing's announcements wash over him. The terror ran endlessly on in his mind, making him feel like a rat trapped on an exercise wheel. And when he tried to look ahead to some better, brighter time, he could see only darkness.

The ship was his sanity, and it was sinking.

Mr. Harley, the headmaster, approached the podium and imparted a brief exordium



about the importance of Finals Week, and how the grades they received would constitute another step upon The Great Road of Life. He told them that the school was depending on them, he was depending on them, and their parents were depending on them. He did not tell them that the entire free world was depending on them, but he strongly implied that this might be so. He finished by telling them that bells would be suspended during Finals Week (the first and only piece of good news Jake had received that morning).

Ms. Franks, who had assumed her seat at the piano, struck an invocatory chord. The student body, seventy boys and fifty girls, each turned out in a neat and sober way that bespoke their parents' taste and financial stability, rose as one and began to sing the school song. Jake mouthed the words and thought about the place where he had awakened after dying. At first he had believed himself to be in hell . . . and when the man in the black hooded robe came along, he had been sure of it.

Then, of course, the other man had come along. A man Jake had almost come to love.

But he let me fall. He killed me.

He could feel prickly sweat breaking out on the back of his neck and between his shoulderblades.

"So we hail the halls of Piper,  
Hold its banner high;  
Hail to thee, our alma mater,  
Piper, do or die!"

God, what a shitty song, Jake thought, and it suddenly occurred to him that his father would love it.

2  
PERIOD ONE WAS ENGLISH Comp, the only class where there was no final. Their assignment had been to write a Final Essay at home. This was to be a typed document between fifteen hundred and four thousand words long. The subject Ms. Avery had assigned was My Understanding of Truth. The Final Essay would count as twenty-five per cent of their final grade for the semester.

Jake came in and took his seat in the third row. There were only eleven pupils in all. Jake remembered Orientation Day last September, when Mr. Harley had told them that Piper had The Highest Teacher To Student Ratio Of Any Fine Private Middle School In The East. He had popped his fist repeatedly on the lectern at the front of the Common Room to emphasize this point. Jake hadn't been terribly impressed, but he had passed the information along to his father. He thought his father would be impressed, and he had not been wrong.

He unzipped his bookbag and carefully removed the blue folder which contained his Final Essay. He laid it on his desk, meaning to give it a final look-over, when his eye was caught by the door at the left side of the room. It led, he knew, to the cloakroom, and it was closed today because it was seventy degrees in New York and no one had a coat which needed storage. Nothing back there except a lot of brass coat hooks in a line on the wall and a long rubber mat on the floor for boots. A few boxes of school supplies—chalk, blue-books and

such—were stored in the far corner.

No big deal.

All the same, Jake rose from his seat, leaving the folder unopened on the desk, and walked across to the door. He could hear his classmates murmuring quietly together, and the ruffle of pages as they checked their own Final Essays for that crucial misplaced modifier or fuzzy phrase, but these sounds seemed far away.

It was the door which held his attention.

In the last ten days or so, as the voices in his head grew louder and louder, Jake had become more and more fascinated with doors—all kinds of doors. He must have opened the one between his bedroom and the upstairs hallway five hundred times in just the last week, and the one between his bedroom and the bathroom a thousand. Each time he did it, he felt a tight ball of hope and anticipation in his chest, as if the answer to all of his problems lay somewhere behind this door or that one and he would surely find it ... eventually. But each time it was only the hall, or the bathroom, or the front walk, or whatever.

Last Thursday he had come home from school, thrown himself on his bed, and had fallen asleep—sleep, it seemed, was the only refuge which remained to him.

Except when he'd awakened forty-five minutes later, he had been standing in the bathroom doorway, peering dazedly in at nothing more exciting than the toilet and the basin. Luckily, no one had seen him.

Now, as he approached the cloakroom door, he felt that same daz-zling burst of hope, a certainty that the door would not open on a shad-owy closet containing only the persistent smells of winter—flannel, rubber, and wet wool—but on some other world where he could be whale again. Hot, dazzling light would fall across the classroom floor in a widening triangle, and he would see birds circling in a faded blue sky the color of

(his eyes)

old jeans. A desert wind would blow his hair back and dry the nervous sweat on his brow.

He would step through this door and be healed.

Jake turned the knob and opened the door. Inside was only darkness and a row of gleaming brass hooks. One long-forgotten mitten lay near the stacked piles of blue-books in the corner.

His heart sank, and suddenly Jake felt like simply creeping into that dark room with its bitter smells of winter and chalkdust. He could move the mitten and sit in the corner under the coathooks. He could sit on the rubber mat where you were supposed to put your boots in the winter-time. He could sit there, put his thumb in his mouth, pull his knees tight against his chest, close his eyes, and . . .

and . . .

And just give up.

This idea—the relief of this idea—was incredibly attractive. It would be an end to the terror and confusion and dislocation. That last was somehow the worst; that persistent feeling that his whole life had turned into a funhouse mirror-maze.

Yet there was deep steel in Jake Chambers as surely as there was deep steel in Eddie and Susannah. Now it flashed out its dour blue lighthouse gleam in the darkness. There would be no giving up. What-ever was loose inside him might tear his sanity away from him in the end, but he would give it no quarter in the

meantime. Be damned if he would.

Never! he thought fiercely. Never! Nev—

"When you've finished your inventory of the school-supplies in the cloakroom, John, perhaps you'd care to join us," Ms. Avery said from behind him in her dry, cultured voice.

There was a small gust of giggles as Jake turned away from the cloakroom. Ms. Avery was standing behind her desk with her long fingers tented lightly on the blotter, looking at him out of her calm, intelligent face. She was wearing her blue suit today, and her hair was pulled back in its usual bun. Nathaniel Hawthorne looked over her shoulder, frowning at Jake from his place on the wall.

"Sorry," Jake muttered, and closed the door. He was immediately seized by a strong impulse to open it again, to double-check, to see if this time that other world, with its hot sun and desert vistas, was there.

Instead he walked back to his seat. Petra Jesserling looked at him with merry, dancing eyes. "Take me in there with you next time," she whispered. "Then you'll have something to look at."

Jake smiled in a distracted way and slipped into his seat.

"Thank you, John," Ms. Avery said in her endlessly calm voice. "Now, before you pass in your Final Essays—which I am sure will all be very fine, very neat, very specific—I should like to pass out the English Department's Short List of recommended summer reading. I will have a word to say about several of these excellent books—"

As she spoke she gave a small stack of mimeographed sheets to David Surrey. David began to hand them out, and Jake opened his folder to take a final look at what he had written on the topic My Understanding of Truth. He was genuinely interested in this, because he could no more remember writing his Final Essay, than he could remember studying for his French final.

He looked at the title page with puzzlement and growing unease. MY UNDERSTANDING OF TRUTH, By John Chambers, was neatly typed and centered on the sheet, and that was all right, but he had for some reason pasted two photographs below it. One was of a door—he thought it might be the one at Number 10, Downing Street, in London—and the other was of an Amtrak train. They were color shots, undoubtedly culled from some magazine.

Why did I do that? And when did I do it?

He turned the page and stared down at the first page of his Final Essay, unable to believe or understand what he was seeing. Then, as understanding began to trickle through his shock, he felt an escalating sense of horror. It had finally happened; he had finally lost enough of his mind so that other people would be able to tell.

3

MY UNDERSTANDING OF TRUTH

By John Chambers

"I will show you fear in a handful of dust."

—T. S. "BUTCH" ELIOT

"My first thought was, he lied in every word."

—ROBERT "SUNDANCE" BROWNING

The gunslinger is the truth.

Roland is the truth.  
The Prisoner is the truth.  
The Lady of Shadows is the truth.  
The Prisoner and the Lady are married. That is the truth.  
The way station is the truth.  
The Speaking Demon is the truth.  
We went under the mountains and that is the truth.  
There were monsters under the mountain. That is the truth.  
One of them had an Amoco gas pump between his legs  
and was pretending it was his penis. That is the truth.  
Roland let me die. That is the truth.  
I still love him.  
That is the truth.

"And it is so very important that you all read *The Lord of the Flies*," Ms. Avery was saying in her clear but somehow pale voice. "And when you do, you must ask yourselves certain questions. A good novel is often like a series of riddles within riddles, and this is a very good novel—one of the best written in the second half of the twentieth century. So ask yourselves first what the symbolic significance of the conch shell might be. Second—"  
Far away. Far, far away. Jake turned to the second page of his Final Essay with a trembling hand, leaving a dark smear of sweat on the first page.

When is a door not a door? When it's a jar, and that is the truth.  
Blaine is the truth.  
Blaine is the truth.  
What has four wheels and flies? A garbage truck, and that is the truth.  
Blaine is the truth.  
You have to watch Blaine all the time, Blaine is a pain, and that is the truth.  
I'm pretty sure that Blaine is dangerous, and that is the truth.  
What is black and white and red all over? A blushing zebra, and that is the truth.  
Blaine is the truth.  
I want to go back and that is the truth.  
I have to go back and that is the truth.  
I'll go crazy if I don't go back and that is the truth.  
I can't go home again unless I find a stone a rose a door and that is the truth.

Choo-choo, and that is the truth.  
Choo-choo. Choo-choo.  
Choo-choo. Choo-choo. Choo-choo.  
Choo-choo. Choo-choo. Choo-choo. Choo-choo.  
I am afraid. That is the truth.  
Choo-choo.

Jake looked up slowly. His heart was beating so hard that he saw a bright light like the afterimage of a flashbulb dancing in front of his eyes, a light that pulsed in and out with each titanic thud of his heart.  
He saw Ms. Avery handing his Final Essay to his mother and father. Mr. Bissette

was standing (reside Ms. Avery, looking grave. He heard Ms. Avery say in her clear, pale voice: Your son is seriously ill. If you need proof, just look at this Final Essay.

John hasn't been himself for the last three weeks or so, Mr. Bissette added. He seems frightened some of the time and dazed all of the time . . . not quite there, if you see what I mean. Je pense que John est fou . . . comprenez-vous?

Ms. Avery again: Do you perhaps keep certain mood-altering pre-scription drugs in the house where John might have access to them?

Jake didn't know about mood-altering drugs, but he knew his father kept several grams of cocaine in the bottom drawer of his study desk. His father would undoubtedly think he had been into it.

"Now let me say a word about Catch-22," Ms. Avery said from the front of the room. "This is a very challenging book for sixth- and seventh-grade students, but you will nonetheless find it entirely enchanting, if you open your minds to its special charm. You may think of this novel, if you like, as a comedy of the surreal."

I don't need to read something like that, Jake thought. I'm living something like that, and it's no comedy.

He turned over to the last page of his Final Essay. There were no words on it. Instead he had pasted another picture to the paper. It was a photograph of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He had used a crayon to scribble it black. The dark, waxy lines looped and swooped in lunatic coils.

He could remember doing none of this.

Absolutely none of it.

Now he heard his father saying to Mr. Bissette: Fou. Yes, he's defi-nitely fou. A kid who'd fuck up his chance at a school like Piper HAS to be fou, wouldn't you say? Well . . . I can handle this. Handling things is my job. Sunnyvale's the answer. He needs to spend some time in Sunnyvale, making baskets and getting his shit back together. Don't you worry about our kid, folks; he can run . . . but he can't hide.

Would they actually send him away to the nuthatch if it started to seem that his elevator no longer went all the way to the top floor? Jake thought the answer to that was a big you bet. No way his father was going to put up with a loony around the house. The name of the place they put him in might not be Sunnyvale, but there would be bars on the windows and there would be young men in white coats and crepe-soled shoes prowling the halls. The young men would have big muscles and watchful eyes and access to hypodermic needles full of artificial sleep.

They'll tell everybody I went away, Jake thought. The arguing voices in his head were temporarily stilled by a rising tide of panic. They'll say I'm spending the year with my aunt and uncle in Modesto ... or in Sweden as an exchange student ... or repairing satellites in outer space. My mother won't like it. . . she'll cry . . . but she'll go along. She has her boyfriends, and besides, she always goes along with what he decides. She . . . they . . . me . . .

He felt a shriek welling up his throat and pressed his lips tightly together to hold it in. He looked down again at the wild black scribbles snarled across the photograph of the Leaning Tower and thought: / have to get out of here. I have to get out right now.

He raised his hand.

"Yes, John, what is it?" Ms. Avery was looking at him with the expression of mild exasperation she reserved for students who interrupted her in mid-lecture.

"I'd like to step out for a moment, if I may," Jake said.

This was another example of Piper-speak. Piper students did not ever have to "take a leak" or "tap a kidney" or, God forbid, "drop a load." The unspoken assumption was that Piper students were too perfect to create waste byproducts in their tastefully silent glides through life. Once in a while someone requested permission to "step out for a moment," and that was all.

Ms. Avery sighed. "Must you, John?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"All right. Return as soon as possible."

"Yes, Ms. Avery."

He closed the folder as he got up, took hold of it, then reluctantly let go again. No good. Ms. Avery would wonder why he was taking his Final Essay to the toilet with him. He should have removed the damning pages from the folder and stuffed them in his pocket before asking for permission to step out. Too late now.

Jake walked down the aisle toward the door, leaving his folder on the desk and his bookbag lying beneath it.

"Hope everything comes out all right, Chambers," David Surrey whispered, and snickered into his hand.

"Still your restless lips, David," Ms. Avery said, clearly exasperated now, and the whole class laughed.

Jake reached the door leading to the hall, and as he grasped the knob, that feeling of hope and surety rose in him again: This is it—really it. I'll open the door and the desert sun will shine in. I'll feel that dry wind on my face. I'll step through and never see this classroom again.

He opened the door and it was only the hallway on the other side, but he was right about one thing just the same: he never saw Ms. Avery's classroom again.

4

HE WALKED SLOWLY DOWN the dim, wood-panelled corridor, sweating lightly. He walked past classroom doors he would have felt compelled to open if not for the clear glass windows set in each one. He looked into Mr. Bissette's French II class and Mr. Knopf's Introduction to Geometry class. In both rooms the pupils sat with pencils in hand and heads bowed over open blue-books. He looked into Mr. Harley's Spoken Arts class and saw Stan Dorfman—one of those acquaintances who were not quite friends—beginning his Final Speech. Stan looked scared to death, but Jake could have told Stan he didn't have the slightest idea what fear—real fear—was all about..

I died.

No. I didn't.

Did too.

Did not.

Did.

Didn't.

He came to a door marked GIRLS. He pushed it open, expecting to see a bright desert sky and a blue haze of mountains on the horizon. Instead he saw Belinda

Stevens standing at one of the sinks, looking into the mirror above the basin and squeezing a pimple on her forehead.

"Jesus Christ, do you mind?" she asked.

"Sorry. Wrong door. I thought it was the desert."

"What?"

But he had already let the door go and it was swinging shut on its pneumatic elbow. He passed the drinking fountain and opened the door marked BOYS. This was it, he knew it, was sure of it, this was the door which would take him back— Three urinals gleamed spotlessly under the fluorescent lights. A tap dripped solemnly into a sink. That was all.

Jake let the door close. He walked on down the hall, his heels making firm little clicks on the tiles. He glanced into the office before passing it and saw only Ms. Franks. She was talking on the telephone, swinging back and forth in her swivel chair and playing with a lock of her hair. The silver-plated bell stood on the desk beside her. Jake waited until she swivelled away from the door and then hurried past. Thirty seconds later he was emerging into the bright sunshine of a morning in late May.

I've gone truant, he thought. Even his distraction did not keep him from being amazed at this unexpected development. When I don't come back from the bathroom in five minutes or so, Ms. Avery will send somebody to check . . . and then they'll know. They'll all know that I've left school, gone truant.

He thought of the folder lying on his desk.

They'll read it and they'll think I'm crazy. Fou. Sure they will. Of course.

Because I am.

Then another voice spoke. It was, he thought, the voice of the man with the bombardier's eyes, the man who wore the two big guns slung low on his hips. The voice was cold . . . but not without comfort.

No, Jake, Roland said. You're not crazy. You're lost and scared, but you're not crazy and need fear neither your shadow in the morning striding behind you nor your shadow at evening rising to meet you. You have to find your way back home, that's all.

"But where do I go?" Jake whispered. He stood on the sidewalk of Fifty-sixth Street between Park and Madison, watching the traffic bolt past. A city bus snored by, laying a thin trail of acrid blue diesel smoke. "Where do I go? Where's the fucking door?"

But the voice of the gunslinger had fallen silent.

Jake turned left, in the direction of the East River, and began to walk blindly forward. He had no idea where he was going—no idea at all. He could only hope his feet would carry him to the right place . . . as they had carried him to the wrong one not long ago.

5

IT HAD HAPPENED THREE weeks earlier.

One could not say It all began three weeks earlier, because that gave the impression that there had been some sort of progression, and that wasn't right. There had been a progression to the voices, to the violence with which each insisted on its own particular version of reality, but the rest of it had happened all at once.

He left home at eight o'clock to walk to school—he always walked when the weather was good, and the weather this May had been abso-lutely fine. His father had left for the Network, his mother was still in bed, and Mrs. Greta Shaw was in the kitchen, drinking coffee and reading her New York Post.

"Goodbye, Greta," he said. "I'm going to school now."

She raised a hand to him without looking up from the paper. "Have a good day, Johnny."

All according to routine. Just another day in the life.

And so it had been for the next fifteen hundred seconds. Then everything had changed forever.

He idled along, bookbag in one hand, lunch sack in the other, looking in the windows. Seven hundred and twenty seconds from the end of his life as he had always known it, he paused to look in the window of Brendio's, where mannequins dressed in fur coats and Edwardian suits stood in stiff poses of conversation.

He was thinking only of going bowling that afternoon after school. His average was 158, great for a kid who was only eleven. His ambition was to some day be a bowler on the pro tour (and if his father had known this little factoid, he also would have hit the roof).

Closing in now—closing in on the moment when his sanity would be suddenly eclipsed.

He crossed Thirty-ninth and there were four hundred seconds left. Had to wait for the WALK light at Forty-first and there were two hundred and seventy. Paused to look in the novelty shop on the corner of Fifth and Forty-second and there were a hundred and ninety. And now, with just over three minutes left in his ordinary life, Jake Cham-bers walked beneath the unseen umbrella of that force which Roland called ka-tet.

An odd, uneasy feeling began to creep over him. At first he thought it was a feeling of being watched, and then he realized it wasn't that at all ... or not precisely that. He felt that he had been here before; that he was reliving a dream he had mostly forgotten. He waited for the feeling to pass, but it didn't. It grew stronger, and now began to mix with a sensation he reluctantly recognized as terror.

Up ahead, on the near corner of Fifth and Forty-third, a black man in a Panama hat was setting up a pretzel-and-soda cart.

He's the one that yells "Oh my God, he's kilt!" Jake thought.

Approaching the far corner was a fat lady with a Bloomingdale's bag in her hand. She'll drop the bag. Drop the bag and put her hands to her mouth and scream. The bag will split open. There's a doll inside the bag. It's wrapped in a red towel.

I'll see this from the street. From where I'll be lying in the street with my blood soaking into my pants and spreading around me in a pool.

Behind the fat woman was a tall man in a gray nailhead worsted suit. He was carrying a briefcase.

He's the one who vomits on his shoes. He's the one who drops his briefcase and throws up on his shoes. What's happening to me?

Yet his feet carried him numbly forward toward the intersection, where people were crossing in a brisk, steady stream. Somewhere behind him, closing in, was a killer priest. He knew this, just as he knew that the priest's hands would in a moment be outstretched to push . . . but he could not look around. It was like being locked in a nightmare where things simply had to take their course.



Fifty-three seconds left now. Ahead of him, the pretzel vendor was opening a hatch in the side of his cart.

He's going to take out a bottle of Yoo-Hoo, Jake thought. Not a can but a bottle. He'll shake it up and drink it all at once.

The pretzel vendor brought out a bottle of Yoo-Hoo, shook it vigorously, and spun off the cap.

Forty seconds left.

Now the light will change.

White WALK went out. Red DONT WALK began to flash rapidly on and off. And somewhere, less than half a block away, a big blue Cadillac was now rolling toward the intersection of Fifth and Forty-third. Jake knew this, just as he knew the driver was a fat man wearing a hat almost the exact same blue shade as his car.

I'm going to die!

He wanted to scream this aloud to the people walking heedlessly all around him, but his jaws were locked shut. His feet swept him serenely onward toward the intersection. The DONT WALK sign stopped flashing and shone out its solid red warning. The pretzel vendor tossed his empty Yoo-Hoo bottle into the wire trash basket on the corner. The fat lady stood on the corner across the street from Jake, holding her shopping bag by the handles. The man in the nailhead suit was directly behind her. Now there were eighteen seconds left.

Time for the toy truck to go by, Jake thought.

Ahead of him a van with a picture of a happy jumping-jack and the words TOOKER'S WHOLESALE TOYS printed on the side swept through the intersection, jolting up and down in the potholes. Behind him, Jake knew, the man in the black robe was beginning to move faster, closing the gap, now reaching out with his long hands. Yet he could not look around, as you couldn't look around in dreams when something awful was gaining on you.

Run! And if you can't run, sit down and grab hold of a No Parking sign! Don't just let it happen!

But he was powerless to stop it from happening. Ahead, on the edge of the curb, was a young woman in a white sweater and a black skirt. To her left was a young Chicano guy with a boombox. A Donna Summer disco tune was just ending. The next song, Jake knew, would be "Dr. Love," by Kiss.

They're going to move apart—

Even as the thought came, the woman moved a step to her right. The Chicano guy moved a step to his left, creating a gap between them. Jake's traitor feet swept him into the gap. Nine seconds now.

Down the street, bright May sunshine twinkled on a Cadillac hood ornament. It was, Jake knew, a 1976 Sedan de Ville. Six seconds. The Caddy was speeding up. The light was getting ready to change and the man driving the de Ville, the fat man in the blue hat with the feather stuck jauntily in the brim, meant to scat through the intersection before it could. Three seconds. Behind Jake, the man in black was lunging forward. On the young man's boombox, "Love to Love You, Baby" ended and "Dr. Love" began.

Two.

The Cadillac changed to the lane nearest Jake's side of the street and charged down on the intersection, its killer grille snarling.

One.

Jake's breath stopped in his throat.

None.

"Uh!" Jake cried as the hands struck him firmly in the back, pushing him, pushing him into the street, pushing him out of his life—

Except there were no hands.

He reeled forward nevertheless, hands flailing at the air, his mouth a dark O of dismay. The Chicano guy with the boombox reached out, grabbed Jake's arm, and hauled him backward. "Look out, little hero," he said. "That traffic turn you into bratwurst."

The Cadillac floated by. Jake caught a glimpse of the fat man in the blue hat peering out through the windshield, and then it was gone.

That was when it happened; that was when he split down the middle and became two boys. One lay dying in the street. The other stood here on the corner, watching in dumb, stricken amazement as DONT WALK turned to WALK again and people began to cross around him just as if nothing had happened ... as, indeed, nothing had.

I'm alive! half of his mind rejoiced, screaming with relief.

Dead! the other half screamed back. Dead in the street! They're all gathering around me, and the man in black who pushed me is saying, "I am a priest. Let me through."

Waves of faintness rushed through him and turned his thoughts to billowing parachute silk. He saw the fat lady approaching, and as she passed, Jake looked into her bag. He saw the bright blue eyes of a doll peeping above the edge of a red towel, just as he had known he would. Then she was gone. The pretzel vendor was not yelling Oh my God, he's kilt; he was continuing to set up for the day's business while he whistled the Donna Summer tune that had been playing on the Chicano guy's radio.

Jake turned around, looking wildly for the priest who was not a priest. He wasn't there.

Jake moaned.

Snap out of it! What's wrong with you?

He didn't know. He only knew he was supposed to be lying in the street right now, getting ready to die while the fat woman screamed and the guy in the nailhead worsted suit threw up and the man in black pushed through the gathering crowd.

And in part of his mind, that did seem to be happening.

The faintness began to return. Jake suddenly dropped his lunch sack to the pavement and slapped himself across the face as hard as he could. A woman on her way to work gave him a queer look. Jake ignored her. He left his lunch lying on the sidewalk and plunged into the intersection, also ignoring the red DONT WALK light, which had begun to stutter on and off again. It didn't matter now. Death had approached . . . and then passed by without a second glance. It hadn't been meant to happen that way, and on the deepest level of his exis-tence he knew that, but it had.

Maybe now he would live forever.

The thought made him feel like screaming all over again.

6  
His HEAD HAD CLEARED a little by the time he got to school, and his mind had

gone to work trying to convince him that nothing was wrong, really nothing at all. Maybe something a little weird had happened, some sort of psychic flash, a momentary peek into one possible future, but so what? No big deal, right? The idea was actually sort of cool—the kind of thing they were always printing in the weird supermarket newspapers Greta Shaw liked to read when she was sure Jake's mother wasn't around—papers like the National Enquirer and Inside View. Except, of course, in those papers the psychic flash was always a kind of tactical nuclear strike—a woman who dreamed of a plane crash and changed her reservations, or a guy who dreamed his brother was being held prisoner in a Chinese fortune cookie factory and it turned out to be true. When your psychic flash consisted of knowing that a Kiss song was going to play next on the radio, that a fat lady had a doll wrapped in a red towel in her Bloomingdale's bag, and that a pretzel vendor was going to drink a bottle of Yoo-Hoo instead of a can, how big a deal could it be?

Forget it, he advised himself. It's over.

A great idea, except by period three he knew it wasn't over; it was just beginning. He sat in pre-algebra, watching Mr. Knopf solving simple equations on the board, and realized with dawning horror that a whole new set of memories was surfacing in his mind. It was like watching strange objects float slowly toward the surface of a muddy lake.

I'm in a place I don't know, he thought. I mean, I will know it—or would have known it if the Cadillac had hit me. It's the way station—but the part of me that's there doesn't know that yet. That part only knows it's in the desert someplace, and there are no people. I've been crying, because I'm scared. I'm scared that this might be hell.

By three o'clock, when he arrived at Mid-Town Lanes, he knew he had found the pump in the stables and had gotten a drink of water. The water was very cold and tasted strongly of minerals. Soon he would go inside and find a small supply of dried beef in a room which had once been a kitchen. He knew this as clearly and surely as he'd known the pretzel vendor would select a bottle of Yoo-Hoo, and that the doll peek-ing out of the Bloomingdale's bag had blue eyes.

It was like being able to remember forward in time.

He bowled only two strings—the first a 96, the second an 87. Timmy looked at his sheet when he turned it in at the counter and shook his head. "You're having an off-day today, champ," he said.

"You don't know the half of it," Jake said.

Timmy took a closer look. "You okay? You look really pale."

"I think I might be coming down with a bug." This didn't feel like a lie, either. He was sure as hell coming down with something.

"Go home and go to bed," Timmy advised. "Drink lots of clear liquids—gin, vodka, stuff like that."

Jake smiled dutifully. "Maybe I will."

He walked slowly home. All of New York was spread out around him, New York at its most seductive—a late-afternoon street serenade with a musician on every corner, all the trees in bloom, and everyone apparently in a good mood. Jake saw all this, but he also saw behind it: saw himself cowering in the shadows of the kitchen as the man in black drank like a grinning dog from the stable pump, saw himself sobbing with relief as he—or it—moved on without discovering him, saw himself falling deeply asleep as the sun went down and the stars began to come

out like chips of ice in the harsh purple desert sky.

He let himself into the duplex apartment with his key and walked into the kitchen to get something to eat. He wasn't hungry, but it was, habit. He was headed for the refrigerator when his eye happened on the pantry door and he stopped. He realized suddenly that the way station— and all the rest of that strange other world where he now belonged— was behind that door. All he had to do was push through it and rejoin the Jake that already existed there. The queer doubling in his mind would end; the voices, endlessly arguing the question of whether or not he had been dead since 8:25 that morning, would fall silent. Jake pushed open the pantry door with both hands, his face already breaking into a sunny, relieved smile . . . and then froze as Mrs. Shaw, who was standing on a step-stool at the back of the pantry, screamed. The can of tomato paste she had been holding dropped out of her hand and fell to the floor. She tottered on the stool and Jake rushed forward to steady her before she could join the tomato paste.

"Moses in the bullrushes!" she gasped, fluttering a hand rapidly against the front of her housedress. "You scared the bejabbers out of me, Johnny!"

"I'm sorry," he said. He really was, but he was also bitterly disappointed. It had only been the pantry, after all. He had been so sure—

"What are you doing, creeping around here, anyway? This is your bowling day! I didn't expect you for at least another hour! I haven't even made your snack yet, so don't be expecting it."

"That's okay. I'm not very hungry, anyway." He bent down and picked up the can she had dropped.

"Wouldn't know it from the way you came bustin in here," she grumbled.

"I thought I heard a mouse or something. I guess it was just you."

"I guess it was." She descended the step-stool and took the can from him. "You look like you're comin down with the flu or something, Johnny." She pressed her hand against his forehead. "You don't feel hot, but that doesn't always mean much."

"I think I'm just tired," Jake said, and thought: If only that was all it was.

"Maybe I'll just have a soda and watch TV for a while."

She grunted. "You got any papers you want to show me? If you do, make it fast. I'm behind on supper."

"Nothing today," he said. He left the pantry, got a soda, then went into the living room. He turned on Hollywood Squares and watched vacantly as the voices argued and the new memories of that dusty other world continued to surface.

7

His MOTHER AND FATHER didn't notice anything was wrong with him— his father didn't even get in until 9:30—and that was fine by Jake. He went to bed at ten and lay awake in the darkness, listening to the city outside his window: brakes, horns, wailing sirens.

You died.

I didn't, though. I'm right here, safe in my own bed.

That doesn't matter. You died, and you know it.

The hell of it was, he knew both things.

I don't know which voice is true, but I know I can't go on like this. So just quit it, both of you. Stop arguing and leave me alone. Okay? Please?

But they wouldn't. Couldn't, apparently. And it came to Jake that he ought to get up—right now—and open the door to the bathroom. The other world would be there. The way station would be there and the rest of him would be there, too, huddled under an ancient blanket in the stable, trying to sleep and wondering what in hell had happened.

I can tell him, Jake thought excitedly. He threw back the covers, suddenly knowing that the door beside his bookcase no longer led into the bathroom but to a world that smelled of heat and purple sage and fear in a handful of dust, a world that now lay under the shadowing wing of night. I can tell him, but I won't have to . . . because I'll be IN him . . . I'll BE him!

He raced across his darkened room, almost laughing with relief, and shoved open the door. And—

And it was his bathroom. Just his bathroom, with the framed Marvin Gaye poster on the wall and the shapes of the Venetian blinds lying on the tiled floor in bars of light and shadow.

He stood there for a long time, trying to swallow his disappointment. It wouldn't go. And it was bitter.

Bitter.

8

THE THREE WEEKS BETWEEN then and now stretched like a grim, blighted terrain in Jake's memory—a nightmare wasteland where there had been no peace, no rest, no respite from pain. He had watched, like a helpless prisoner watching the sack of a city he had once ruled, as his mind buckled under the steadily increasing pressure of the phantom voices and memories. He had hoped the memories would stop when he reached the point in them where the man named Roland had allowed him to drop into the chasm under the mountains, but they didn't. Instead they simply recycled and began to play themselves over again, like a tape set to repeat and repeat until it either breaks or someone comes along, and shuts it off.

His perceptions of his more-or-less real life as a boy in New York City grew increasingly spotty as this terrible schism grew deeper. He could remember going to school, and to the movies on the weekend, and out to Sunday brunch with his parents a week ago (or had it been two?), but he remembered these things the way a man who has suffered malaria may remember the deepest, darkest phase of his illness: people became shadows, voices seemed to echo and overlap each other, and even such a simple act as eating a sandwich or obtaining a Coke from the machine in the gymnasium became a struggle. Jake had pushed through those days in a fugue of yelling voices and doubled memories. His obsession with doors—all kinds of doors—deepened; his hope that the gunslinger's world might lie behind one of them never quite died. Nor was that so strange, since it was the only hope he had.

But as of today the game was over. He'd never had a chance of winning anyway, not really. He had given up. He had gone truant. Jake walked blindly east along the gridwork of streets, head down, with no idea of where he was going or what

he would do when he got there.

9

AFTER WALKING FOR A while, he began to come out of this unhappy daze and take some notice of his surroundings. He was standing on the corner of Lexington Avenue and Fifty-fourth Street with no memory at all of how he had come to be there. He noticed for the first time that it was an absolutely gorgeous morning. May 9th, the day this madness had started, had been pretty, but today was ten times better—that day, perhaps, when spring looks around herself and sees summer standing nearby, strong and handsome and with a cocky grin on his tanned face. The sun shone brightly off the glass walls of the midtown buildings; the shadow of each pedestrian was black and crisp. The sky overhead was a clear and blameless blue, dotted here and there with plump foul-weather clouds.

Down the street, two businessmen in expensive, well-cut suits were standing at a board wall which had been erected around a construction site. They were laughing and passing something back and forth. Jake walked in their direction, curious, and as he drew closer he saw that the two businessmen were playing tic-tac-toe on the wall, using an expensive Mark Cross pen to draw the grids and make the X's and O's. Jake thought this was a complete gas. As he approached, one of them made an O in the upper right-hand corner of the grid and then slashed a diagonal line through the middle.

"Skunked again!" his friend said. Then this man, who looked like a high-powered executive or lawyer or big-time stockbroker, took the Mark Cross pen and drew another grid.

The first businessman, the winner, glanced to his left and saw Jake. He smiled.

"Some day, huh, kid?"

"It sure is," Jake said, delighted to find he meant every word.

"Too nice for school, huh?"

This time Jake actually laughed. Piper School, where you had Outs instead of lunch and where you sometimes stepped out but never had to take a crap, suddenly seemed far away and not at all important. "You know it."

"You want a game? Billy here couldn't beat me at this when we were in the fifth grade, and he still can't."

"Leave the kid alone," the second businessman said, holding out the Mark Cross pen. "This time you're history." He winked at Jake, and Jake amazed himself by winking back. He walked on, leaving the men to their game. The sense that something totally wonderful was going to happen— had perhaps already begun to happen—continued to grow, and his feet no longer seemed to be quite touching the pavement.

The WALK light on the corner came on, and he began to cross Lexington Avenue. He stopped in the middle of the street so suddenly that a messenger-boy on a ten-speed bike almost ran him down. It was a beautiful spring day—agreed. But that wasn't why he felt so good, so suddenly aware of everything that was going on around him, so sure that some great thing was about to occur.

The voices had stopped.

They weren't gone for good—he somehow knew this—but for the time being they had stopped. Why?

Jake suddenly thought of two men arguing in a room. They sit facing each other

over a table, jawing at each other with increasing bitterness. After a while they begin to lean toward each other, thrusting their faces pugnaciously forward, bathing each other with a fine mist of outraged spittle. Soon they will come to blows. But before that can happen, they hear a steady thumping noise—the sound of a bass drum—and then a jaunty flourish of brass. The two men stop arguing and look at each other, puzzled.

What's that? one asks.

Dunno, the other replies. Sounds like a parade.

They rush to the window and it is a parade—a uniformed band marching in lock-step with the sun blazing off their horns, pretty majorettes twirling batons and strutting their long, tanned legs, convertibles decked with flowers and filled with waving celebrities.

The two men stare out the window, their quarrel forgotten. They will undoubtedly return to it, but for the time being they stand together like the best of friends, shoulder to shoulder, watching as the parade goes by—

10

A HORN BLARED, STARTLING Jake out of this story, which was as vivid as a powerful dream. He realized he was still standing in the middle of Lexington, and the light had changed. He looked around wildly, expecting to see the blue Cadillac bearing down on him, but the guy who had tooted his horn was sitting behind the wheel of a yellow Mustang convertible and grinning at him. It was as if everyone in New York had gotten a whiff of happy-gas today.

Jake waved at the guy and sprinted to the other side of the street. The guy in the Mustang twirled a finger around his ear to indicate that Jake was crazy, then waved back and drove on.

For a moment Jake simply stood on the far corner, face turned up to the May sunshine, smiling, digging the day. He supposed prisoners condemned to die in the electric chair must feel this way when they learn they have been granted a temporary reprieve.

The voices were still.

The question was, what was the parade which had temporarily diverted their attention? Was it just the uncommon beauty of this spring morning?

Jake didn't think that was all. He didn't think so because that sensation of knowing was creeping over him and through him again, the one which had taken possession of him three weeks ago, as he approached the corner of Fifth and Forty-sixth. But on May 9th, it had been a feeling of impending doom. Today it was a feeling of radiance, a sense of goodness and anticipation. It was as if ... as if ...

White. This was the word that came to him, and it clanged in his mind with clear and unquestionable lightness.

"It's the White!" he exclaimed aloud. "The coming of the White!"

He walked on down Fifty-fourth Street, and as he reached the corner of Second and Fifty-fourth, he once more passed under the umbrella of ka-tet.

11

HE TURNED RIGHT, THEN stopped, turned, and retraced his steps to the corner. He

needed to walk down Second Avenue now, yes, that was unquestionably correct, but this was the wrong side again. When the light changed, he hurried across the street and turned right again. That feeling, that sense of  
(Whiteness)

rightness, grew steadily stronger. He felt half-mad with joy and relief. He was going to be okay. This time there was no mistake. He felt sure that he would soon begin to see people he recognized, as he had recognized the fat lady and the pretzel vendor, and they would be doing things he remembered in advance. Instead, he came to the bookstore.

12  
THE MANHATTAN RESTAURANT OF THE MIND, the sign painted in the window read. Jake went to the d(x>r. There was a chalkboard hung there; it looked like the kind you saw on the wall in diners and lunchrooms.

#### TODAY'S SPECIALS

From Florida! Fresh-Broiled John D. MacDonald Hardcovers 3 for \$2.50 Paperbacks 9 for \$5.00

From Mississippi! Pan-Fried William Faulkner Hardcovers Market Price Vintage Library Paperbacks 75\$ each

From California! Hard-Boiled Raymond Chandler Hardcovers Market Price Paperbacks 7 for \$5.00

#### FEED YOUR NEED TO READ

Jake went in, aware that he had, for the first time in three weeks, opened a door without hoping madly to find another world on the other side. A bell jingled overhead. The mild, spicy smell of old books hit him, and the smell was somehow like coming home.

The restaurant motif continued inside. Although the walls were lined with shelves of books, a fountain-style counter bisected the room. On Jake's side of the counter were a number of small tables with wire-backed Malt Shoppe chairs. Each table had been arranged to display the day's specials: Travis McGee novels by John D. Mac-Donald, Philip Marlowe novels by Raymond Chandler, Snopes novels by William Faulkner. A small sign on the Faulkner table said: Some rare 1st eds available—pls ask. Another sign, this one on the counter, read simply: BROWSE! A couple of customers were doing just that. They sat at the counter, drinking coffee and reading. Jake thought this was without a doubt the best bookstore he'd ever been in.

The question was, why was he here? Was it luck, or was it part of that soft, insistent feeling that he was following a trail—a land of force-beam—that had been left for him to find?

He glanced at the display on a small table to his left and knew the answer.

13  
IT WAS A DISPLAY of children's books. There wasn't much room on the table, so there were only about a dozen of them—Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, The Hobbit, Tom Sawyer, things like that. Jake had been attracted by a storybook



obviously meant for very young children. On the bright green cover was an anthropomorphic locomotive puffing its way up a hill. Its cowcatcher (which was bright pink) wore a happy grin and its headlight was a cheerful eye which seemed to invite Jake Chambers to come inside and read all about it. Charlie the Choo-Choo, the title proclaimed, Story and Pictures by Beryl Evans. Jake's mind flashed back to his Final Essay, with the picture of the Amtrak train on the title-page and the words choo-choo written over and over again inside.

He grabbed the book and clutched it tightly, as if it might fly away if he relaxed his grip. And as he looked down at the cover, Jake found that he did not trust the smile on Charlie the Choo-Choo's face. YOM look happy, but I think that's just the mask you wear, he thought. I don't think you're happy at all. And I don't think Charlie's your real name, either.

These were crazy thoughts to be having, undoubtedly crazy, but they did not feel crazy. They felt sane. They felt true.

Standing next to the place where Charlie the Choo-Choo had been was a tattered paperback. The cover was quite badly torn and had been mended with Scotch tape now yellow with age. The picture showed a puzzled-looking boy and girl with a forest of question-marks over their heads. The title of this book was Riddle-De-Dum! Brain-Twisters and Puzzles for Everyone! No author was credited. Jake tucked Charlie the Choo-Choo under his arm and picked up the riddle book. He opened it at random and saw this:

When is a door not a door?

"When it's a jar," Jake muttered. He could feel sweat popping out on his forehead . . . his arms ... all over his body.

"When it's ajar!"

"Find something, son?" a mild voice inquired.

Jake turned around and saw a fat guy in an open-throated white shirt standing at the end of the counter. His hands were stuffed in the pockets of his old gabardine slacks. A pair of half-glasses were pushed up on the bright dome of his bald head.

"Yes," Jake said feverishly. "These two. Are they for sale?"

"Everything you see is for sale," the fat guy said. "The building itself would be for sale, if I owned it. Alas, I only lease." He held out his hand for the books and for a moment Jake balked. Then, reluctantly, he handed them over. Part of him expected the fat guy to flee with them, and if he did—if he gave the slightest indication of trying it—Jake meant to tackle him, rip the books out of his hands, and boogie. He needed those books.

"Okay, let's see what you got," the fat man said. "By the way, I'm Tower. Calvin Tower." He stuck out his hand.

Jake's eyes widened, and he took an involuntary step backward. "What?"

The fat guy looked at him with some interest. "Calvin Tower. Which word is profanity in your language, O Hyperborean Wanderer?"

"Huh?"

"I just mean you look like someone goosed you, kid."

"Oh. Sorry." He clasped Mr. Tower's large, soft hand, hoping the man wouldn't pursue it. The name had given him a jump, but he didn't know why. "I'm Jake Chambers."

Calvin Tower shook his hand. "Good handle, pard. Sounds like the footloose hero in a Western novel—the guy who blows into Black Fork, Arizona, cleans up the

town, and then travels on. Something by Wayne D. Overholser, maybe. Except you don't look footloose, Jake. You look like you decided the day was a little too nice to spend in school."

"Oh ... no. We finished up last Friday."

Tower grinned. "Uh-huh. I bet. And you've gotta have these two items, huh? It's sort of funny, what people have to have. Now you—I would have pegged you as a Robert Howard land of kid from the jump, looking for a good deal on one of those nice old Donald M. Grant editions—the ones with the Roy Krenkel paintings. Dripping swords, mighty thews, and Conan the Barbarian hacking his way through the Stygian hordes."

"That sounds pretty good, actually. These are for . . . uh, for my little brother. It's his birthday next week."

Calvin Tower used his thumb to flip his glasses down onto his nose and had a closer look at Jake. "Really? You look like an only child to me. An only child if I ever saw one, enjoying a day of French leave as Mistress May trembles in her green gown just outside the bosky dell of June."

"Come again?"

"Never mind. Spring always puts me in a William Cowper-ish mood. People are weird but interesting, Tex—am I right?"

"I guess so," Jake said cautiously. He couldn't decide if he liked this odd man or not.

One of the counter-browsers spun on his stool. He was holding a cup of coffee in one hand and a bartered paperback copy of *The Plague* in the other. "Quit pulling the kid's chain and sell him the books, Cal," he said. "We've still got time to finish this game of chess before the end of the world, if you hurry up."

"Hurry is antithetical to my nature," Cal said, but he opened *Charlie the Choo-Choo* and peered at the price pencilled on the flyleaf. "A fairly common book, but this copy's in unusually fine condition. Little kids usually rack the hell out of the ones they like. I should get twelve dollars for it—"

"Goddam thief," the man who was reading *The Plague* said, and the other browser laughed. Calvin Tower paid no notice.

"—but I can't bear to dock you that much on a day like this. Seven bucks and it's yours. Plus tax, of course. The riddle book you can have for free. Consider it my gift to a boy wise enough to saddle up and light out for the territories on the last real day of spring."

Jake dug out his wallet and opened it anxiously, afraid he had left the house with only three or four dollars. He was in luck, however. He had a five and three ones. He held the money out to Tower, who folded the bills casually into one pocket and made change out of the other.

"Don't hurry off, Jake. Now that you're here, come on over to the counter and have a cup of coffee. Your eyes will widen with amazement as I cut Aaron Deepneau's spavined old *Kiev Defense* to ribbons."

"Don't you wish," said the man who was reading *The Plague*—Aaron Deepneau, presumably.

"I'd like to, but I can't. I ... there's someplace I have to be."

"Okay. As long as it's not back to school."

Jake grinned. "No—not school. That way lies madness."

Tower laughed out loud and flipped his glasses up to the top of his head again.

"Not bad! Not bad at all! Maybe the younger generation isn't going to hell after

all, Aaron—what do you think?"

"Oh, they're going to hell, all right," Aaron said. "This boy's just an exception to the rule. Maybe."

"Don't mind that cynical old fart," Calvin Tower said. "Motor on, O Hyperborean Wanderer. I wish I were ten or eleven again, with a beautiful day like this ahead of me."

"Thanks for the books," Jake said.

"No problem. That's what we're here for. Come on back sometime."

"I'd like to."

"Well, you know where we are."

Yes, Jake thought. Now if I only knew where I am.

14

HE STOPPED JUST OUTSIDE the bookstore and flipped open the riddle book again, this time to page one, where there was a short uncredited introduction.

"Riddles are perhaps the oldest of all the games people still play today," it began. "The gods and goddesses of Greek myth teased each other with riddles, and they were employed as teaching tools in ancient Rome. The Bible contains several good riddles. One of the most famous of these was told by Samson on the day he was married to Delilah:

'Out of the eater came forth meat,  
and out of the strong came forth sweetness!'

"He asked this riddle of several young men who attended his wedding, confident that they wouldn't be able to guess the answer. The young men, however, got Delilah aside and she whispered the answer to them. Samson was furious, and had the young men put to death for cheating—in the old days, you see, riddles were taken much more seriously than they are today!

"By the way, the answer to Samson's riddle—and all the other riddles in this book—can be found in the section at the back. We only ask that you give each puzzler a fair chance before you peek!"

Jake turned to the back of the book, somehow knowing what he would find even before he got there. Beyond the page marked ANSWERS there was nothing but a few torn fragments and the back cover. The section had been ripped out.

He stood there for a moment, thinking. Then, on an impulse that didn't really feel like an impulse at all, Jake walked back inside The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind.

Calvin Tower looked up from the chessboard. "Change your mind about that cup of coffee, O Hyperborean Wanderer?"

"No. I wanted to ask you if you know the answer to a riddle."

"Fire away," Tower invited, and moved a pawn.

"Samson told it. The strong guy in the Bible? It goes like this—"

" 'Out of the eater came forth meat,' " said Aaron Deepneau, swing-ing around again to look at Jake, " 'and out of the strong came forth sweetness.' That the one?"

"Yeah, it is," Jake said. "How'd you know—"

"Oh, I've been around the block a time or two. Listen to this." He threw his

head back and sang in a full, melodious voice:

" Samson and a lion got in attack,  
And Samson climbed up on the lion's back.  
Well, you've read about lion killin men with their paws,  
But Samson put his hands round the lion's jaws!  
He rode that lion 'til the beast fell dead,  
And the bees made honey in the lion's head."

Aaron winked and then laughed at Jake's surprised expression. "That answer your question, friend?"

Jake's eyes were wide. "Wow! Good song! Where'd you hear it?"

"Oh, Aaron knows them all," Tower said. "He was hanging around Bleecker Street back before Bob Dylan knew how to blow more than open G on his Hohner. At least, if you believe him."

"It's an old spiritual," Aaron said to Jake, and then to Tower: "By the way, you're in check, fatso."

"Not for long," Tower said. He moved his bishop. Aaron promptly bagged it. Tower muttered something under his breath. To Jake it sounded suspiciously like fuckwad.

"So the answer is a lion," Jake said.

Aaron shook his head. "Only half the answer. Samson's Riddle is a double, my friend. The other half of the answer is honey. Get it?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Okay, now try this one." Aaron closed his eyes for a moment and then recited,

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

"Smartass," Tower growled at Aaron.

Jake thought it over, then shook his head. He could have worried it longer—he found this business of riddles both fascinating and charm-ing—but he had a strong feeling that he ought to be moving on from here, that he had other business on Second Avenue this morning.

"I give up."

"No, you don't," Aaron said. "That's what you do with modern rid-dles. But a real riddle isn't just a joke, kiddo—it's a puzzle. Turn it over in your head. If you still can't get it, make it an excuse to come back another day. If you need another excuse, fatso here does make a pretty good cup of joe."

"Okay," Jake said. "Thanks. I will."

But as he left, a certainty stole over him: he would never enter The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind again.

JAKE WALKED SLOWLY DOWN Second Avenue, holding his new purchases in his left hand. At first he tried to think about the riddle—what did have a bed but never slept?—but little by little the question was driven from his mind by an increasing sense of anticipation. His senses seemed more acute than ever before in his life; he saw billions of coruscating sparks in the pavement, smelled a thousand mixed aromas in every breath he took, and seemed to hear other sounds, secret sounds, within each of the sounds he heard. He wondered if this was the way dogs felt before thunderstorms or earthquakes, and felt almost sure that it was. Yet the sensation that the impending event was not bad but good, that it would balance out the terrible thing which had happened to him three weeks ago, continued to grow.

And now, as he drew close to the place where the course would be set, that knowing-in-advance fell upon him once again.

A bum is going to ask me for a handout, and I'll give him the change Mr. Tower gave me. And there's a record store. The door's open to let in the fresh air and I'll hear a Stones song playing when I pass. And I'm going to see my own reflection in a bunch of mirrors.

Traffic on Second Avenue was still light. Taxis honked and wove their way amid the slower-moving cars and trucks. Spring sunshine twin-kled off their windshields and bright yellow hides. While he was waiting for a light to change, Jake saw the bum on the far corner of Second and Fifty-second. He was sitting against the brick wall of a small restaurant, and as Jake approached him, he saw that the name of the restaurant was Chew Chew Mama's.

Choo-choo, Jake thought. And that's the truth.

"Godda-quarder?" the bum asked tiredly, and Jake dropped his change from the bookstore into the bum's lap without even looking around. Now he could hear the Rolling Stones, right on schedule:

"I see a red door and I want to paint it black,  
No colours anymore, I want them to turn black ..."

As he passed, he saw—also without surprise—that the name of the store was Tower of Power Records.

Towers were selling cheap today, it seemed.

Jake walked on, the street-signs floating past in a kind of dream-daze. Between Forty-ninth and Forty-eighth he passed a store called Reflections of You. He turned his head and caught sight of a dozen Jakes in the mirrors, as he had known he would—a dozen boys who were small for their age, a do/en boys dressed

in neat school clothes: blue blazers, white shirts, dark red ties, gray dress pants. Piper School didn't have an official uniform, but this was as close to the unofficial one as you could get.

Piper seemed long ago and far away now.

Suddenly Jake realized where he was going. This knowledge rose in his mind like sweet, refreshing water from an underground spring. It's a delicatessen, he thought. That's what it looks like, anyway. It's really something else—a doorway to another world. The world. His world. The right world.

He began to run, looking ahead eagerly. The light at Forty-seventh was against him but he ignored it, leaping from the curb and racing nimbly between the broad white lines of the crosswalk with just a perfunctory glance to the left. A plumbing van stopped short with a squeal of tires as Jake flashed in front of it.

"Hey! Whaddaya-whaddaya?" the driver yelled, but Jake ignored him.

Only one more block.

He began to sprint all-out now. His tie fluttered behind his left shoulder; his hair had blown back from his forehead; his school loafers hammered the sidewalk. He ignored the stares—some amused, some merely curious—of the passersby as he had ignored the van driver's out-raged shout.

Up here—up here on the corner. Next to the stationery store.

Here came a UPS man in dark brown fatigues, pushing a dolly loaded with packages. Jake hurdled it like a long-jumper, arms up. The tail of his white shirt pulled free of his pants and flapped beneath his blazer like the hem of a slip. He came down and almost collided with a baby-carriage being pushed by a young Puerto Rican woman. Jake hooked around the pram like a halfback who has spotted a hole in the line and is bound for glory. "Where's the fire, handsome?" the young woman asked, but Jake ignored her, too. He dashed past The Paper Patch, with its window-display of pens and notebooks and desk calculators. The door! he thought ecstatically. I'm going to see it! And am I going to stop? No, way, Jose! I'm going to go straight through it, and if it's locked, I'll flatten it right in front of m—

Then he saw what was at the corner of Second and Forty-sixth and stopped after all—skidded to a halt, in fact, on the heels of his loafers. He stood there in the middle of the sidewalk, hands clenched, his breath rasping harshly in and out of his lungs, his hair falling back onto his forehead in sweaty clumps.

"No," he almost whimpered. "No!" But his near-frantic negation did not change what he saw, which was nothing at all. There was nothing to see but a short board fence and a littered, weedy lot beyond it.

The building which had stood there had been demolished.

16

JAKE STOOD OUTSIDE THE fence without moving for almost two minutes, surveying the vacant lot with dull eyes. One corner of his mouth twitched randomly. He could feel his hope, his absolute certainty, draining out of him. The feeling which was replacing it was the deepest, bitterest despair he had ever known. Just another false alarm, he thought when the shock had abated enough so he could think anything at all. Another false alarm, blind alley, dry well. Now the voices will start up again, and when they do, I think I'm going to start

screaming. And that's okay. Because I'm tired of tough-ing this thing out. I'm tired of going crazy. If this is what going crazy is like, then I just want to hurry up and get there so somebody will take me to the hospital and give me something that'll knock me out. I give up. This is the end of the line—I'm through.

But the voices did not come back—at least, not yet. And as he began to think about what he was seeing, he realized that the lot wasn't completely empty, after all. Standing in the middle of the trash-littered, weedy waste ground was a sign.

MILLS CONSTRUCTION AND SOMBRA REAL ESTATE  
ASSOCIATES ARE CONTINUING TO REMAKE THE FACE OF  
MANHATTAN!

COMING SOON TO THIS LOCATION:  
TURTLE BAY LUXURY CONDOMINIUMS!  
CALL 555-6712 FOR INFORMATION!  
YOU WILL BE SO GLAD YOU DID!

Coming soon? Maybe . . . but Jake had his doubts. The letters on the sign were faded and it was sagging a little. At least one graffiti artist, BANCO SKANK by name, had left his mark across the artist's drawing of the Turtle Bay Luxury Condominiums in bright blue spray-paint. Jake wondered if the project had been postponed or if it had maybe just gone belly-up. He remembered hearing his father talking on the telephone to his business advisor not two weeks ago, yelling at the man to stay away from any more condo investments. "I don't care how good the tax-picture looks!" he'd nearly screamed (this was, so far as Jake could tell, his father's normal tone of voice when discussing business matters—the coke in the desk drawer might have had something to do with that). "When they're offering a goddamn TV set just so you'll come down and look at a blueprint, something's wrong!"

The board fence surrounding the lot was chin-high to Jake. It had been plastered with handbills—Olivia Newton-John at Radio City, a group called G. Gordon Liddy and the Grots at a club in the East Village, a film called War of the Zombies which had come and gone earlier that spring. NO TRESPASSING signs had also been nailed up at intervals along the fence, but most of them had been papered over by ambitious bill-posters. A little way farther along, another graffito had been spray-painted on the fence—this one in what had once undoubtedly been a bright red but which had now faded to the dusky pink of late-summer roses. Jake whispered the words aloud, his eyes wide and fascinated:

"See the TURTLE of enormous girth!  
On his shell he holds the earth  
If you want to run and play,  
Come along the BEAM today."

Jake supposed the source of this strange little poem (if not its meaning) was clear enough. This part of Manhattan's East Side was known, after all, as Turtle Bay. But that didn't explain the gooseflesh which was now running up the center of his back in a rough stripe, or his clear sense that he had found another

road-sign along some fabulous hidden highway.

Jake unbuttoned his shirt and stuck his two newly purchased books inside. Then he looked around, saw no one paying attention to him, and grabbed the top of the fence. He boosted himself up, swung a leg over, and dropped down on the other side. His left foot landed on a loose pile of bricks that promptly slid out from under him. His ankle buckled under his weight and bright pain lanced up his leg. He fell with a thud and cried out in mingled hurt and surprise as more bricks dug into his ribcage like thick, rude fists.

He simply lay where he was for a moment, waiting to get his breath back. He didn't think he was badly hurt, but he'd twisted his ankle and it would probably swell. He'd be walking with a limp by the time he got home. He'd just have to grin and bear it, though; he sure didn't have cab-fare.

You don't really plan to go home, do you? They'll eat you alive.

Well, maybe they would and maybe they wouldn't. So far as he could see, he didn't have much choice in the matter. And that was for later. Right now he was going to explore this lot which had drawn him as surely as a magnet draws steel shavings. That feeling of power was still all around him, he realized, and stronger than ever. He didn't think this was just a vacant lot. Something was going on here, some-thing big. He could feel it thrumming in the air, like loose volts escaping from the biggest power-plant in the world.

As he got up, Jake saw that he had actually fallen lucky. Close by was a nasty jumble of broken glass. If he'd fallen into that, he might have cut himself very badly.

That used to be the show window, Jake thought. When the deli was still here, you could stand on the sidewalk and look in at all the meats and cheeses. They used to hang them on strings. He didn't know how he knew this, but he did-knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

He looked around thoughtfully and then walked a little farther into the lot.

Near the middle, lying on the ground and half-buried in a lush growth of spring weeds, was another sign. Jake knelt beside it, pulled it upright, and brushed the dirt away. The letters were faded, but he could still make them out:

**TOM AND GERRY'S ARTISTIC DELI  
PARTY PLATTERS OUR SPECIALTY!**

And below it, spray-painted in that same red-fading-to-pink, was this puzzling sentence: **HE HOLDS US ALL WITHIN HIS MIND.**

This is the place, Jake thought. Oh yes.

He let the sign fall back, stood up, and walked deeper into the lot, moving slowly, looking at everything. As he moved, that sensation of power grew. Everything he saw—the weeds, the broken glass, the clumps of bricks—seemed to stand forth with a kind of exclamatory force. Even the potato chip bags seemed beautiful, and the sun had turned a discarded beer-bottle into a cylinder of brown fire.

Jake was very aware of his own breathing, and of the sunlight falling upon everything like a weight of gold. He suddenly understood that he was standing on the edge of a great mystery, and he felt a shudder—half terror and half wonder—work through him.

It's all here. Everything. Everything is still here.



The weeds brushed at his pants; burdocks stuck to his socks. The breeze blew a Ring-Ding wrapper in front of him; the sun reflected off it and for a moment the wrapper was filled with a beautiful, terrible inner glow.

"Everything is still here," he repeated to himself, unaware that his face was filling with its own inner glow. "Everything."

He was hearing a sound—had been hearing it ever since he entered the lot, in fact. It was a wonderful high humming, inexpressibly lonely and inexpressibly lovely. It might have been the sound of a high wind on a deserted plain, except it was alive. It was, he thought, the sound of a thousand voices singing some great open chord. He looked down and realized there were faces in the tangled weeds and low bushes and heaps of bricks. Faces.

"What are you?" Jake whispered. "Who are you?" There was no answer, but he seemed to hear, beneath the choir, the sound of hoof-beats on the dusty earth, and gunfire, and angels calling hosannahs from the shadows. The faces in the wreckage seemed to turn as he passed. They seemed to follow his progress, but no evil intent did they bear. He could see Forty-sixth Street, and the edge of the U.N. Building on the other side of First Avenue, but the buildings did not matter—New York did not matter. It had become as pale as window-glass.

The humming grew. Now it was not a thousand voices but a million, an open funnel of voices rising from the deepest well of the universe. He caught names in that group voice, but could not have said what they were. One might have been Marten. One might have been Cuthbert. Another might have been Roland—Roland of Gilead. There were names; there was a babble of conversation that might have been ten thousand entwined stories; but above all was that gor-geous, swelling hum, a vibration that wanted to fill his head with bright white light. It was, Jake realized with a joy so overwhelming that it threatened to burst him to pieces, the voice of Yes; the voice of White; the voice of Always. It was a great chorus of affirmation, and it sang in the empty lot. It sang for him.

Then, lying in a cluster of scrubby burdock plants, Jake saw the key . . . and beyond that, the rose.

17

His LEGS BETRAYED HIM and he fell to his knees. He was vaguely aware that he was weeping, even more vaguely aware that he had wet his pants a little. He crawled forward on his knees and reached toward the key lying in the snarl of burdocks. Its simple shape was one he seemed to have seen in his dreams:

He thought: The little s-shape at the end—that's the secret.

As he closed his hand around the key, the voices rose in a harmonic shout of triumph. Jake's own cry was lost in the voice of that choir, he saw the key flash white within his fingers, and felt a tremendous jolt of power run up his arm. It was as if he had grasped a live high-tension wire, but there was no pain.

He opened Charlie the Choo-Choo and put the key inside. Then his eyes fixed upon the rose again, and he realized that it was the real key—the key to everything. He crawled toward it, his face a flaming corona of light, his eyes blazing wells of blue fire.

The rose was growing from a clump of alien purple grass.

As Jake neared this clump of alien grass, the rose began to open before his eyes. It disclosed a dark scarlet furnace, petal upon secret petal, each burning with its own secret fury. He had never seen anything so intensely and utterly alive in his whole life.

And now, as he stretched one grimy hand out toward this wonder, the voices began to sing his own name . . . and deadly fear began to steal in toward the center of his heart. It was as cold as ice and as heavy as stone.

There was something wrong. He could feel a pulsing discord, like a deep and ugly scratch across some priceless work of art or a deadly fever smoldering beneath the chilly skin of an invalid's brow.

It was something like a worm. An invading worm. And a shape. One which lurks just beyond the next turn of the road.

Then the heart of the rose opened for him, exposing a yellow dazzle of light, and all thought was swept away on a wave of wonder. Jake thought for a moment that what he was seeing was only pollen which had been invested with the supernatural glow which lived at the heart of every object in this deserted clearing—he thought it even though he had never heard of pollen within a rose. He leaned closer and saw that the concentrated circle of blazing yellow was not pollen at all. It was a sun: a vast forge burning at the center of this rose growing in the purple grass.

The fear returned, only now it had become outright terror. It's right, he thought, everything here is right, but it could go wrong—has started going wrong already, I think. I'm being allowed to feel as much of that wrongness as I can bear . . . but what is it? And what can I do?

It was something like a worm.

He could feel it beating like a sick and dirty heart, warring with the serene beauty of the rose, screaming harsh profanities against the choir of voices which had so soothed and lifted him.

He leaned closer to the rose and saw that its core was not just one sun but many . . . perhaps all suns contained within a ferocious yet fragile shell.

But it's wrong. It's all in danger.

Knowing it would almost surely mean his death to touch that glowing microcosm Init helpless to stop himself, Jake reached forward. There was no curiosity or terror in this gesture; only a great, inarticulate need to protect the rose.

18

WHEN HE CAME BACK to himself, he was at first only aware that a great deal of time had passed and his head hurt like hell.

What happened? Was I mugged?

He rolled over and sat up. Another blast of pain went through his head. He raised a hand to his left temple, and his fingers came away sticky with blood.

He looked down and saw a brick poking out of the weeds. Its rounded corner was too red.

If it had been sharp, I'd probably be dead or in a coma.

He looked at his wrist and was surprised to find he was still wearing his watch.

It was a Seiko, not terribly expensive, but in this city you didn't snooze in vacant lots without losing your stuff. Expensive or not, someone would be more than happy to relieve you of it. This time he had been lucky, it seemed.

It was quarter past four in the afternoon. He had been lying here, dead to the world, for at least five hours. His father probably had the cops out looking for him by now, but that didn't seem to matter much. It seemed to Jake that he had walked out of Piper School about a thousand years ago.

Jake walked half the distance to the fence between the vacant lot and the Second Avenue sidewalk, then stopped.

What exactly had happened to him?

Little by little, the memories came back. Hopping the fence. Slipping and twisting his ankle. He reached down, touched it, and winced. Yes—that much had happened, all right. Then what?

Something magical.

He groped for that something like an old man groping his way across a shadowy room. Everything had been full of its own light. Everything—even the empty wrappers and discarded beer-bottles. There had been voices—they had been singing and telling thousands of overlapping stories.

"And faces," he muttered. This memory made him look around apprehensively. He saw no faces. The piles of bricks were just piles of bricks, and the tangles of weeds were just tangles of weeds. There were no faces, but—  
—but they were here. It wasn't your imagination.

He believed that. He couldn't capture the essence of the memory, its quality of beauty and transcendence, but it seemed perfectly real. It was just that his memory of those moments before he had passed out seemed like photographs taken on the best day of your life. You can remember what that day was like—sort of, anyway—but the pictures are flat and almost powerless.

Jake looked around the desolate lot, now filling up with the violet shadows of late afternoon, and thought: / want you back. God, I want you back the way you were.

Then he saw the rose, growing in its clump of purple grass, very close to the place where he had fallen. His heart leaped into his throat. Jake blundered back toward it, unmindful of the beats of pain each step sent up from his ankle. He dropped to his knees in front of it like a worshipper at an altar. He leaned forward, eyes wide.

It's just a rose. Just a rose after all. And the grass—

The grass wasn't purple after all, he saw. There were splatters of purple on the blades, yes, but the color beneath was a perfectly normal green. He looked a little further and saw splashes of blue on another clump of weeds. To his right, a straggling burdock bush bore traces of both red and yellow. And beyond the burdocks was a little pile of discarded paint-cans. Glidden Spread Satin, the labels said.

That's all it was. Just splatters of paint. Only with your head all messed up the way it was, you thought you were seeing—

That was bullshit.

He knew what he had seen then, and what he was seeing now. "Camouflage," he whispered. "It was all right here. Everything was. And ... it still is."

Now that his head was clearing, he could again feel the steady, harmonic power that this place held. The choir was still here, its voice just as musical, although now dim and distant. He looked at a pile of bricks and old broken chunks of plaster and saw a barely discernible face hiding within it. It was the face of a woman with a scar on her forehead.

"Allie?" Jake murmured. "Isn't your name Allie?"

There was no answer. The face was gone. He was only looking at an unlovely pile of bricks and plaster again.

He looked back at the rose. It was, he saw, not the dark red that lives at the heart of a blazing furnace, but a dusty, mottled pink. It was very beautiful, but not perfect. Some of the petals had curled back; the outer edges of these were brown and dead. It wasn't the sort of cultivated flower he had seen in florists' shops; he supposed it was a wild rose.

"You're very beautiful," he said, and once more stretched his hand out to touch it.

Although there was no breeze, the rose nodded toward him. For just a moment the pads of his fingers touched its surface, smooth and velvety and marvellously alive, and all around him the voice of the choir seemed to swell.

"Are you sick, rose?"

There was no answer, of course. When his fingers left the faded pink bowl of the flower, it nodded back to its original position, growing out of the paint-splattered weeds in its quiet, forgotten splendor.

Do roses bloom at this time of year? Jake wondered. Wild ones? Why would a wild rose grow in a vacant lot, anyway? And if there's one, how come there aren't more?

He remained on his hands and knees a little longer, then realized he could stay here looking at the rose for the rest of the afternoon (or maybe the rest of his life) and not come any closer to solving its mystery. He had seen it plain for a moment, as he had seen everything else in this forgotten, trash-littered corner of the city; he had seen it with its mask off and its camouflage tossed aside.

He wanted to see that again, but wanting would not make it so.

It was time to go home.

He saw the two books he'd bought at The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind lying nearby. As he picked them up, a bright silver object slipped from the pages of Charlie the Choo-Choo and fell into a scruffy patch of weeds. Jake bent, favoring his hurt ankle, and picked it up. As he did so, the choir seemed to sigh and swell, then fell back to its almost inaudible hum.

"So that part was real, too," he murmured. He ran the ball of his thumb over the blunt protruding points of the key and into those primi-tive V-shaped notches. He sent it skating over the mild s-curves at the end of the third notch. Then he tucked it deep into the right front pocket of his pants and began to limp back toward the fence.

He had reached it and was preparing to scramble over the top when a terrible thought suddenly seized his mind.

The rose! What if somebody comes in here and picks it?

A little moan of horror escaped him. He turned back and after a moment his eyes picked it out, although it was deep in the shadow of a neighboring building now—a tiny pink shape in the dimness, vulnerable, beautiful, and alone.

I can't leave it—I have to guard it!

But a voice spoke up in his mind, a voice that was surely that of the man he had met at the way station in that strange other life. No one will pick it. Nor will any vandal crush it beneath his heel because his dull eyes cannot abide the sight of its beauty. That is not the danger. It can protect itself from such things as those.

A sense of deep relief swept through Jake.

Can I come here again and look at it? he asked the phantom voice.

When I'm low, or if the voices come back and start their argument again? Can I come back and look at it and have some peace?

The voice did not answer, and after a few moments of listening, Jake decided it was gone. He tucked Charlie the Choo-Choo and Riddle-De-Dum! into the waistband of his pants—which, he saw, were streaked with dirt and dotted with clinging burdocks—and then grabbed the board fence. He boosted himself up, swung over the top, and dropped onto the sidewalk of Second Avenue again, being careful to land on his good foot.

Traffic on the Avenue—both pedestrian and vehicular—was much heavier now as people made their way home for the night. A few passersby looked at the dirty boy in the torn blazer and untucked, flapping shirt as he jumped awkwardly down from the fence, but not many. New Yorkers are used to the sight of people doing peculiar things.

He stood there a moment, feeling a sense of loss and realizing something else, as well—the arguing voices were still absent. That, at least, was something.

He glanced at the board fence; and the verse of spray-painted dog-gerel seemed to leap out at him, perhaps because the paint was the same color as the rose.

"See the TURTLE of enormous girth" Jake muttered. "On his shell he holds the earth." He shivered. "What a day! Boy!"

He turned and began to limp slowly in the direction of home.

19

THE DOORMAN MUST HAVE buzzed up as soon as Jake entered the lobby, because his father was standing outside the elevator when it opened on the fifth floor.

Elmer Chambers was wearing faded jeans and cowboy boots that improved his five-ten to a rootin, tootin six feet. His black, crewcut hair bolted up from his head; for as long as Jake could remember, his father had looked like a man who had just suffered some tremendous, galvanizing shock. As soon as Jake stepped out of the elevator, Chambers seized him by the arm.

"Look at you!" His father's eyes flicked up and down, taking in Jake's dirty face and hands, the blood drying on his cheek and temple, the dusty pants, the torn blazer, and the burdock that clung to his tie like some peculiar clip. "Get in here! Where the hell have you been? Your mother's just about off her fucking gourd!"

Without giving Jake a chance to answer, he dragged him through the apartment door. Jake saw Greta Shaw standing in the archway between the dining room and the kitchen. She gave him a look of guarded sympathy, then disappeared before the eyes of "the mister" could chance upon her.

Jake's mother was sitting in her rocker. She got to her feet when she saw Jake, but she did not leap to her feet; neither did she pelt across to the foyer so she could cover him with kisses and invective. As she came toward him, Jake assessed her eyes and guessed she'd had at least three Valium since noon. Maybe four. Both of his parents were firm believers in better living through chemistry.

"You're bleeding! Where have you been?" She made this inquiry in her cultured Vassar voice, pronouncing been so it rhymed with seen. She might have been

greeting an acquaintance who had been involved in a minor traffic accident.

"Out," he said.

His father gave him a rough shake. Jake wasn't prepared for it. He stumbled and came down on his bad ankle. The pain flared again, and he was suddenly furious. Jake didn't think his father was pissed because he had disappeared from school, leaving only his mad composition behind; his father was pissed because Jake had had the temerity to fuck up his own precious schedule.

To this point in his life, Jake had been aware of only three feelings about his father: puzzlement, fear, and a species of weak, confused love. Now a fourth and fifth surfaced. One was anger; the other was disgust. Mixed in with these unpleasant feelings was that sense of homesickness. It was the largest thing inside him right now, weaving through everything else like smoke. He looked at his father's flushed cheeks and screaming haircut and wished he was back in the vacant lot, looking at the rose and listening to the choir. This is not my place, he thought. Not anymore. I have work to do. If only I knew what it was. "Let go of me," he said.

"What did you say to me?" His father's blue eyes widened. They were very bloodshot tonight. Jake guessed he had been dipping heavily into his supply of magic powder, and that probably made this a bad time to cross him, but Jake realized he intended to cross him just the same. He would not be shaken like a mouse in the jaws of a sadistic tomcat. Not tonight. Maybe not ever again. He suddenly realized that a large part of his anger stemmed from one simple fact: he could not talk to them about what had happened—what was still happening. They had closed all the doors.

But I have a key, he thought, and touched its shape through the fabric of his pants. And the rest of that strange verse occurred to him: If you want to run and play, /Come along the BEAM today.

"I said let go of me," he repeated. "I've got a sprained ankle and you're hurting it."

"I'll hurt more than your ankle if you don't—"

Sudden strength seemed to How into Jake. He seized the hand clamped on his arm just below the shoulder and shoved it violently away. His father's mouth dropped open.

"I don't work for you," Jake said. "I'm your son, remember? If you forgot, check the picture on your desk."

His father's upper lip pulled back from his perfectly capped teeth in a snarl that was two parts surprise and one part fury. "Don't you talk to me like that, mister—where in the hell is your respect?"

"I don't know. Maybe I lost it on the way home."

"You spend the whole goddamn day absent without leave and then you stand there running your fat, disrespectful mouth—"

"Stop it! Stop it, both of you!" Jake's mother cried. She sounded near tears in spite of the tranquilizers perking through her system.

Jake's father reached for Jake's arm again, then changed his mind. The surprising force with which his son had torn his hand away a moment ago might have had something to do with it. Or perhaps it was only the look in Jake's eyes. "I want to know where you've been."

"Out. I told you that. And that's all I'm going to tell you."

"Fuck that! Your headmaster called, your French teacher actually came here, and

they both had beaucoup questions for you! So do I, and I want some answers!"

"Your clothes are dirty," his mother observed, and then added timidly: "Were you mugged, Johnny? Did you play hookey and get mugged?"

"Of course he wasn't mugged," Elmer Chambers snarled. "Still wearing his watch, isn't he?"

"But there's blood on his head."

"It's okay, Mom. I just bumped it."

"But—"

"I'm going to go to bed. I'm very, very tired. If you want to talk about this in the morning, okay. Maybe we'll all be able to make some sense then. But for now, I don't have a thing to say."

His father took a step after him, reaching out.

"No, Elmer!" Jake's mother almost screamed.

Chambers ignored her. He grabbed Jake by the back of the blazer. "Don't you just walk away from me—" he began, and then Jake whirled, tearing the blazer out of his hand. The seam under the right arm, already strained, let go with a rough purring sound.

His father saw those blazing eyes and stepped away. The rage on his face was doused by something that looked like terror. That blaze was not metaphorical; Jake's eyes actually seemed to be on fire. His mother gave voice to a strengthless little scream, clapped one hand to her mouth, took two large, stumbling steps backward, and dropped into her rocking chair with a small thud.

"Leave. . . me . . . alone," Jake said.

"What's happened to you?" his father asked, and now his tone was almost plaintive. "What in the hell's happened to you? You bug out of school without a word to anyone on the first day of exams, you come back filthy from head to toe . . . and you act as if you've gone crazy."

Well, there it was—you act as if you've gone crazy. What he'd been afraid of ever since the voices started three weeks ago. The Dread Accu-sation. Only now that it was out, Jake found it didn't frighten him much at all, perhaps because he had finally put the issue to rest in his own mind. Yes, something had happened to him. Was still happening. But no—he had not gone crazy. At least, not yet.

"We'll talk about it in the morning," he repeated. He walked across the dining room, and this time his father didn't try to stop him. He had almost reached the hall when his mother's voice, worried, stopped him: "Johnny . . . are you all right?"

And what should he answer? Yes? No? Both of the above? Neither of the above? But the voices had stopped, and that was something. That was, in fact, quite a lot.

"Better," he said at last. He went down to his room and closed the door firmly behind him. The sound of the door snicking firmly shut between him and all the rest of the round world filled him with tremendous relief.

20

HE STOOD BY THE door for a little while, listening. His mother's voice was only a murmur, his father's voice a little louder.

His mother said something about blood, and a doctor.

His father said the kid was fine; the only thing wrong with the kid was the junk

coming out of his mouth, and he would fix that.

His mother said something about calming down.

His father said he was calm.

His mother said—

He said, she said, blah, blah, blah. Jake still loved them—he was pretty sure he did, anyway—but other stuff had happened now, and these things had made it necessary that still other things must occur.

Why? Because something was wrong with the rose. And maybe because he wanted to run and play . . . and see his eyes again, as blue as the sky above the way station had been.

Jake walked slowly over to his desk, removing his blazer as he went. It was pretty wasted—one sleeve torn almost completely off, the lining hanging like a limp sail. He slung it over the back of his chair, then sat down and put the books on his desk. He had been sleeping very badly over the last week and a half, but he thought tonight he would sleep well. He couldn't remember ever being so tired. When he woke up in the morning, perhaps he would know what to do.

There was a light knock at the door, and Jake turned warily in that direction.

"It's Mrs. Shaw, John. May I come in for a minute?"

He smiled. Mrs. Shaw—of course it was. His parents had drafted her as an intermediary. Or perhaps translator might be a better word.

You go see him, his mother would have said. Hell tell you what's wrong with him. I'm his mother and this man with the bloodshot eyes and the runny nose is his father and you're only the housekeeper, but he'll tell you what he wouldn't tell us. Because you see more of him than either of us, and maybe you speak his language.

She'll have a tray, Jake thought, and when he opened the door he was smiling.

Mrs. Shaw did indeed have a tray. There were two sandwiches on it, a wedge of apple pie, and a glass of chocolate milk. She was looking at Jake with mild anxiety, as if she thought he might lunge forward and try to bite her. Jake looked over her shoulder, but there was no sign of his parents. He imagined them sitting in the living room, listening anxiously.

"I thought you might like something to eat," Mrs. Shaw said.

"Yes, thanks." In fact, he was ravenously hungry; he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He stood aside and Mrs. Shaw came in (giving him another apprehensive look as she passed) and put the tray on the desk.

"Oh, look at this," she said, picking up Charlie the Choo-Choo. "I had this one when I was a little girl. Did you buy this today, Johnny?"

"Yes. Did my parents ask you to find out what I'd been up to?"

She nodded. No acting, no put-on. It was just a chore, like taking out the trash. You can tell me if you want to, her face said, or you can keep still. I like you, Johnny, but it's really nothing to me, one way or the other. I just work here, and it's already an hour past my regular quitting time.

He was not offended by what her face had to say; on the contrary, he was further calmed by it. Mrs. Shaw was another acquaintance who was not quite a friend . . . but he thought she might be a little closer to a friend than any of the kids at school were, and much closer than either his mother or father. Mrs. Shaw was honest, at least. She didn't dance. It all went on the bill at the end of the month, and she always cut the crusts off the sandwiches.



Jake picked up a sandwich and took a large bite. Bologna and cheese, his favorite. That was another thing in Mrs. Shaw's favor—she knew all his favorites. His mother was still under the impression that he liked corn on the cob and hated Brussels sprouts.

"Please tell them I'm fine," he said, "and tell my father I'm sorry that I was rude to him."

He wasn't, but all his father really wanted was that apology. Once Mrs. Shaw conveyed it to him, he would relax and begin to tell himself the old lie—he had done his fatherly duty and all was well, all was well, and all manner of things were well.

"I've been studying very hard for my exams," he said, chewing as he talked, "and it all came down on me this morning, I guess. I sort of froze. It seemed like I had to get out or I'd suffocate." He touched the dried crust of blood on his forehead. "As for this, please tell my mother it's really nothing. I didn't get mugged or anything; it was just a stupid accident. There was a UPS guy pushing a hand-truck, and I walked right into it. The cut's no big deal. I'm not having double vision or anything, and even the headache's gone now."

She nodded. "I can see how it must have been—a high-powered school like that and all. You just got a little spooked. No shame in that, Johnny. But you really haven't seemed like yourself this last couple of weeks."

"I think I'll be okay now. I might have to re-do my Final Essay in English, but—"

"Oh!" Mrs. Shaw said. A startled look crossed her face. She put Charlie the Choo-Choo back down on Jake's desk. "I almost forgot! Your French teacher left something for you. I'll just get it."

She left the room. Jake hoped he hadn't worried Mr. Bisette, who was a pretty good guy, but he supposed he must have, since Bisette had actually made a personal appearance. Jake had an idea that personal appearances were pretty rare for Piper School teachers. He wondered what Mr. Bisette had left. His best guess was an invitation to talk with Mr. Hotchkiss, the school shrink. That would have scared him this morn-ing, but not tonight.

Tonight only the rose seemed to matter.

He tore into his second sandwich. Mrs. Shaw had left the door open, and he could hear her talking with his parents. They both sounded a little more cooled out now. Jake drank his milk, then grabbed the plate with the apple pie on it. A few moments later Mrs. Shaw came back. She was carrying a very familiar blue folder. Jake found that not all of his dread had left him after all. They would all know by now, of course, students and faculty alike, and it was too late to do anything about it, but that didn't mean he liked all of them knowing he had flipped his lid. That they were talking about him.

A small envelope had been paper-clipped to the front of the folder.

Jake pulled it free and looked up at Mrs. Shaw as he opened it. "How are my folks doing now?" he asked.

She allowed herself a brief smile. "Your father wanted me to ask why you didn't just tell him you had Exam Fever. He said he had it himself once or twice when he was a boy."

Jake was struck by this; his father had never been the sort of man to indulge in reminiscences which began, You know, when I was a kid . . . Jake tried to imagine his father as a boy with a bad case of Exam Fever and found he couldn't

quite do it—the best he could manage was the unpleasant image of a pugnacious dwarf in a Piper sweatshirt, a dwarf in custom-tooled cowboy boots, a dwarf with short black hair bolting up from his forehead.

The note was from Mr. Bissette.

Dear John,

Bonnie Avery told me that you left early. She's very concerned about you, and so am I, although we have both seen this sort of thing before, especially during Exam Week. Please come and see me first thing tomorrow, okay? Any problems you have can be worked out. If you're feeling pressured by exams—and I want to repeat that it happens all the time—a postponement can be arranged. Our first concern is your welfare. Call me this evening, if you like; you can reach me at 555-7661. Ill be up until midnight.

Remember that we all like you very much, and are on your side.

A votre sante'

Len Bissette

Jake felt like crying. The concern was stated, and that was wonderful, but there were other things, unstated things, in the note that were even more wonderful—warmth, caring, and an effort (however misconceived) to understand and console.

Mr. Bissette had drawn a small arrow at the bottom of the note. Jake turned it over and read this:

By the way, Bonnie asked me to send this along—congratulations!!

Congratulations? What in the hell did that mean?

He flipped open the folder. A sheet of paper had been clipped to the first page of his Final Essay. It was headed FROM THE DESK OF BONITA AVERY, and Jake read the spiky, fountain-penned lines with grow-ing amazement.

John,

Leonard will undoubtedly voice the concern we all feel—he is awfully good at that—so let me confine myself to your Final Essay, which I read and graded during my free period. It is stun-ningly original, and superior to any student work I have read in the last few years. Your use of incremental repetition (" . . . and that is the truth") is inspired, but of course incremental repetition is really just a trick. The real worth of the composition is in its symbolic quality, first stated by the images of the train and the door on the title page and carried through splendidly within. This reaches its logical conclusion with the picture of the "black tower," which I take as your statement that conventional ambitions are not only false but dangerous.

I do not pretend to understand all the symbolism (e.g., "Lady of Shadows," "gunslinger") but it seems clear that you yourself are "The Prisoner" (of school, society, etc.) and that the educational system is "The Speaking Demon." Is it possible that both "Roland" and "the gunslinger" are the same authority figure—your father, perhaps? I became so intrigued by this possibility that I looked up his name in your records. I note it is Elmer, but I further note that his middle initial is R.

I find this extremely provocative. Or is this name a double symbol, drawn both from your father and from Robert Brow-ning's poem "Childe Roland to the Dark

Tower Came"? This is not a question I would ask most students, but of course I know how omnivorously you read!

At any rate, I am extremely impressed. Younger students are often attracted to so-called "stream-of-consciousness" writing, but are rarely able to control it. You have done an outstanding job of merging s-of-c with symbolic language. Bravo!

Drop by as soon as you're "back at it"—I want to discuss possible publication of this piece in the first issue of next year's student literary magazine.

B. Avery

P. S. If you left school today because you had sudden doubts about my ability to understand a Final Essay of such unexpected richness, I hope I have assuaged them.

Jake pulled the sheet off the clip, revealing the title page of his stunningly original and richly symbolic Final Essay. Written and circled there in the red ink of Ms. Avery's marking pen was the notation A +. Below this she had written EXCELLENT JOB!!!

Jake began to laugh.

The whole day—the long, scary, confusing, exhilarating, terrify-ing, mysterious day—was condensed in great, roaring sobs of laughter. He slumped in his chair, head thrown back, hands clutching his belly, tears streaming down his face. He laughed himself hoarse. He would almost stop and then some line from Ms. Avery's well-meaning cri-tique would catch his eye and he would be off to the races again. He didn't see his father come to the door, look in at him with puzzled, wary eyes, and then leave again, shaking his head.

At last he did become aware that Mrs. Shaw was still sitting on his bed, looking at him with an expression of friendly detachment tintured with faint curiosity.

He tried to speak, but the laughter pealed out again before he could.

I gotta stop, he thought. I gotta stop or it's gonna kill me. I'll have a stroke or a heart attack, or something.

Then he thought, 7 wonder what she made of "choo-choo, choo-choo?," and he began to laugh wildly again.

At last the spasms began to taper off to giggles. He wiped his arm across his streaming eyes and said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Shaw—it's just that . . . well ... I got an A-plus on my Final Essay. It was all very . . . very rich . . . and very sym . . . sym . . ."

But he couldn't finish. He doubled up with laughter again, hold-ing his throbbing belly.

Mrs. Shaw got up, smiling. "That's very nice, John. I'm happy it's all turned out so well, and I'm sure your folks will be, too. I'm awfully late—I think I'll ask the doorman to call me a cab. Goodnight, and sleep well."

"Goodnight, Mrs. Shaw," Jake said, controlling himself with an effort. "And thanks."

As soon as she was gone, he began to laugh again.

21

DURING THE NEXT HALF hour he had separate visits from both parents. They had indeed calmed down, and the A + grade on Jake's Final Essay seemed to calm them

further. Jake received them with his French text open on the desk before him, but he hadn't really looked at it, nor did he have any intention of looking at it. He was only waiting for them to be gone so he could study the two books he had bought earlier that day. He had an idea that the real Final Exams were still waiting just over the horizon, and he wanted desperately to pass.

His father poked his head into Jake's room around quarter of ten, about twenty minutes after Jake's mother had concluded her own short, vague visit. Elmer Chambers was holding a cigarette in one hand and a glass of Scotch in the other. He seemed not only calmer but almost zonked. Jake wondered briefly and indifferently if he had been hitting his mother's Valium supply.

"Are you okay, kid?"

"Yes." He was once again the small, neat boy who was always completely in control of himself. The eyes he turned to his father were not blazing but opaque.

"I wanted to say I'm sorry about before." His father was not a man who made many apologies, and he did it badly. Jake found himself feeling a little sorry for him.

"It's all right."

"Hard day," his father said. He gestured with the empty glass. "Why don't we just forget it happened?" He spoke as if this great and logical idea had just come to him.

"I already have."

"Good." His father sounded relieved. "Time for you to get some sleep, isn't it? You'll have some explaining to do and some tests to take tomorrow."

"I guess so," Jake said. "Is Mom okay?"

"Fine. Fine. I'm going in the study. Got a lot of paperwork tonight."

"Dad?"

His father looked back at him warily.

"What's your middle name?"

Something in his father's face told Jake that he had looked at the Final Essay grade but hadn't bothered to read either the paper itself or Ms. Avery's critique.

"I don't have one," he said. "Just an initial, like Harry S Truman. Except mine's an R. What brought that on?"

"Just curious," Jake said.

He managed to hold onto his composure until his father was gone . . . but as soon as the door was closed, he ran to his bed and stuffed his face into his pillow to muffle another bout of wild laughter.

22

WHEN HE WAS SURE he was over the current fit (although an occasional snicker still rumbled up his throat like an aftershock) and his father would be safely locked away in his study with his cigarettes, his Scotch, his papers, and his little bottle of white powder, Jake went back to his desk, turned on the study lamp, and opened Charlie the Choo-Choo. He glanced briefly at the copyright page and saw it had originally been published in 1942; his copy was from the fourth printing. He looked at the back, but there was no information at all about Beryl Evans, the book's author.

Jake turned back to the beginning, looked at the picture of a grin-ning, blonde-haired man sitting in the cab of a steam locomotive, considered the proud grin on the man's face, and then began to read.

Bob Brooks was an engineer for the Mid-World Railway Company, on the St. Louis to Topeka run. Engineer Bob was the best trainman The Mid-World Railway Company ever had, and Charlie was the best train!

Charlie was a 402 Big Boy Steam Locomotive, and Engineer Bob was the only man who had ever been allowed to sit in his peak-seat and pull the whistle. Everyone knew the WHOOO-OOOO of Charlie's whistle, and whenever they heard it echoing across the flat Kan-sas countryside, they said, "There goes Charlie and Engi-neer Bob, the fastest team between St. Louis and Topeka!"

Boys and girls ran into their yards to watch Charlie and Engineer Bob go by. Engineer Bob would smile and wave. The children would smile and wave back. Engineer Bob had a special secret. He was the only one who knew. Charlie the Choo-Choo was really, really alive. One day while they were making the run between Topeka and St. Louis, Engineer Bob heard singing, very soft and low. "Who is in the cab with me?" Engineer Bob said sternly.

"You need to see a shrink, Engineer Bob," Jake murmured, and turned the page. Here was a picture of Bob bending over to look beneath, Charlie the Choo-Choo's automatic firebox. Jake wondered who was driv-ing the train and watching out for cows (not to mention boys and girls) on the tracks while Bob was checking for stowaways, and guessed that Beryl Evans hadn't known a lot about trains.

"Don't worry," said a small, gruff voice. "It is only I."

"Who's I?" Engineer Bob asked. He spoke in his big-gest, sternest voice, because he still thought someone was playing a joke on him.

"Charlie," said the small, gruff voice.

"Hardy har-har!" said Engineer Bob. "Trains can't talk! I may not know much, but I know that! If you're Charlie, I suppose you can blow your own whistle!"

"Of course," said the small, gruff voice, and just then the whistle made its big noise, rolling out across the Mis-souri plains: WHOOO-OOOO!

"Goodness!" said Engineer Bob. "It really is you!"

"I told you," said Charlie the Choo-Choo.

"How come I never knew you were alive before?" asked Engineer Bob. "Why didn't you ever talk to me before?"

Then Charlie sang this song to Engineer Bob in his small, gruff voice.

Don't ask me silly questions,  
I won't play silly games.  
I'm just a simple choo-choo train  
And I'll always be the same.

I only want to race along  
Beneath the bright blue sky,  
And be a happy choo-choo train  
Until the day I die.

"Will you talk to me some more when we're making our run?" asked Engineer Bob.

"I'd like that."

"I would, too," said Charlie. "I love you, Engineer Bob."

"I love you too, Charlie," said Engineer Bob, and then he blew the whistle himself, just to show how happy he was. WHOOO-OOO! It was the biggest and best Charlie had ever whistled, and everyone who heard it came out to see.

The picture which illustrated this last was similar to the one on the cover of the book. In the previous pictures (they were rough drawings which reminded Jake of the pictures in his favorite kindergarten book, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*), the locomotive had been just a locomotive—cheery, undoubtedly interesting to the '40s-era boys who had been this book's intended audience, but still only a piece of machinery. In this picture, however, it had clearly human features, and this gave Jake a deep chill despite Charlie's smile and the rather heavy-handed cuteness of the story.

He didn't trust that smile.

He turned to his Final Essay and scanned down the lines. I'm pretty sure Blame is dangerous, he read, and that is the truth.

He closed the folder, tapped his fingers on it thoughtfully for a few moments, then returned to Charlie the Choo-Choo.

Engineer Bob and Charlie spent many happy days together and talked of many things. Engineer Bob lived alone, and Charlie was the first real friend he'd had since his wife died, long ago, in New York.

Then one day, when Charlie and Engineer Bob returned to the roundhouse in St. Louis, they found a new diesel locomotive in Charlie's berth. And what a diesel locomotive it was! 5,000 horsepower! Stainless steel couplers! Traction motors from the Utica Engine Works in Utica, New York! And sitting on top, behind the generator, were three bright yellow radiator cooling fans.

"What is this?" Engineer Bob asked in a worried voice, but Charlie only sang his song in his smallest, gruffest voice:

Don't ask me silly questions,  
I won't play silly games.  
I'm just a simple choo-choo train  
And I'll always be the same.

I only want to race along  
Beneath the bright blue sky,  
And be a happy choo-choo train  
Until the day I die.

Mr. Briggs, the Roundhouse Manager, came over.

"That is a beautiful diesel locomotive," said Engineer Bob, "but you will have to move it out of Charlie's berth, Mr. Briggs. Charlie needs a lube job this very afternoon."

"Charlie won't be needing any more lube jobs, Engineer Bob," said Mr. Briggs sadly. "This is his replacement—a brand-new Burlington Zephyr diesel loco. Once, Charlie was the best locomotive in the world, but now he is old and his boiler leaks. I am afraid the time has come for Charlie to retire."

"Nonsense!" Engineer Bob was mad! "Charlie is still full of zip and zowie! I

will telegraph the head office of The Mid-World Railway Company! I will telegraph the President, Mr. Raymond Martin, myself! I know him, because he once gave me a Good Service Award, and afterwards Charlie and I took his little daughter for a ride. I let her pull the lanyard, and Charlie whistled his loudest for her!"

"I am sorry, Bob," said Mr. Briggs, "Taut it was Mr. Martin himself who ordered the new diesel loco."

It was true. And so Charlie the Choo-Choo was shunted off to a siding in the furthest corner of Mid-World's St. Louis yard to rust in the weeds. Now the HONNNK! HONNNK! of the Burlington Zephyr was heard on the St. Louis to Topeka run, and Charlie's blew no more. A family of mice nested in the seat where Engi-neer Bob once sat so proudly, watching the countryside speed past; a family of swallows nested in his smoke-stack. Charlie was lonely and very sad. He missed the steel tracks and bright blue skies and wide open spaces. Sometimes, late at night, he thought of these things and cried dark, oily tears. This rusted his fine Stratham head-light, but he didn't care, because now the Stratham head-light was old, and it was always dark.

Mr. Martin, the President of The Mid-World Railway Company, wrote and offered to put Engineer Bob in the peak-seat of the new Burlington Zephyr. "It is a fine loco, Engineer Bob," said Mr. Martin, "chock-full of zip and zowie, and you should be the one to pilot it! Of all the Engineers who work for Mid-World, you are the best. And my daughter Susannah has never forgotten that you let her pull old Charlie's whistle."

But Engineer Bob said that if he couldn't pilot Char-lie, his days as a trainman were done. "I wouldn't under-stand such a fine new diesel loco," said Engineer Bob, "and it wouldn't understand me."

He was given a job cleaning the engines in the St. Louis yards, and Engineer Bob became Wiper Bob. Some-times the other engineers who drove the fine new diesels would laugh at him. "Look at that old fool!" they said. "He cannot understand that the world has moved on!"

Sometimes, late at night, Engineer Bob would go to the far side of the rail yard, where Charlie the Choo-Choo stood on the rusty rails of the lonely siding which had become his home. Weeds had twined in his wheels; his headlight was rusty and dark. Engineer Bob always talked to Charlie, but Charlie replied less and less. Many nights he would not talk at all.

One night, a terrible idea came into Engineer Bob's head. "Charlie, are you dying?" he asked, and in his smallest, gruffest voice, Charlie replied:

Don't ask me silly questions,  
I won't play silly games,  
I'm just a simple choo-choo train  
And I'll always be the same.

Now that I can't race along  
Beneath the bright blue sky  
I guess that I'll just sit right here  
Until I finally die.

Jake looked at the picture accompanying this not-exactly-unexpected turn of

events for a long time. Rough drawing it might be, but it was still definitely a three-handkerchief job. Charlie looked old, beaten, and forgotten. Engineer Bob looked like he had lost his last friend . . . which, according to the story, he had. Jake could imagine children all over America blating their heads off at this point, and it occurred to him that there were a lot of stories for lads with stuff like this in them, stuff that threw acid all over your emotions. Hansel and Gretel being turned out into the forest, Bambi's mother getting scragged by a hunter, the death of Old Yeller. It was easy to hurt little kids, easy to make them cry, and this seemed to bring out a strangely sadistic streak in many story-tellers . . . including, it seemed, Beryl Evans.

But, Jake found, he was not saddened by Charlie's relegation to the weedy wastelands at the outer edge of the Mid-World trainyards in St. Louis. Quite the opposite. Good, he thought. That's the place for him. That's the place, because he's dangerous. Let him rot there, and don't trust that tear in his eye—they say crocodiles cry, too.

He read the rest rapidly. It had a happy ending, of course, although it was undoubtedly that moment of despair on the edge of the trainyards which children remembered long after the happy ending had slipped their minds.

Mr. Martin, the President of The Mid-World Railway Company, came to St. Louis to check on the operation. His plan was to ride the Burlington Zephyr to Topeka, where his daughter was giving her first piano recital, that very afternoon. Only the Zephyr wouldn't start. There was water in the diesel fuel, it seemed.

(Were you the one who watered the diesel, Engineer Bob? Jake wondered. I bet it was, you sly dog, you!)

All the other trains were out on their runs! What to do?

Someone tugged Mr. Martin's arm. It was Wiper Bob, only he no longer looked like an engine-wiper. He had taken off his oil-stained dungarees and put on a clean pair of overalls. On his head was his old pillowtick engi-neer's cap.

"Charlie's is right over there, on that siding," he said. "Charlie will make the run to Topeka, Mr. Martin. Charlie will get you there in time for your daughter's piano recital."

"That old steamer?" scoffed Mr. Briggs. "Charlie would still be fifty miles out of Topeka at sundown!"

"Charlie can do it," Engineer Bob insisted. "Without a train to pull, I know he can! I have been cleaning his engine and his boiler in my spare time, you see."

"We'll give it a try," said Mr. Martin. "I would be sorry to miss Susannah's first recital!"

Charlie was all ready to go; Engineer Bob had filled his tender with fresh coal, and the firebox was so hot its sides were red. He helped Mr. Martin up into the cab and backed Charlie off the rusty, forgotten siding and onto the main track for the first time in years. Then, as he engaged Forward First, he pulled on the lanyard and Charlie gave his old brave cry: WHOOO-OOOOO!

All over St. Louis the children heard that cry, and ran out into their yards to watch the rusty old steam loco pass. "Look!" they cried. "It's Charlie! Charlie the Choo-Choo is back! Hurrah!" They all waved, and as Charlie steamed out of town, gathering speed, he blew his own whistle, just as he had in the old days: WHOOOO-OOOOOOO!

Clickety-clack went Charlie's wheels!

Chuffa-chuffa went the smoke from Charlie's stack!



Brump-brump went the conveyor as it fed coal into the firebox!

Talk about zip! Talk about zowie! Golly gee, gosh, and wowie! Charlie had never gone so fast before! The countryside went whizzing by in a blur! They passed the cars on Route 41 as if they were standing still!

"Hoptedoodle!" cried Mr. Martin, waving his hat in the air. "This is some locomotive, Bob! I don't know why we ever retired it! How do you keep the coal-conveyor loaded at this speed?"

Engineer Bob only smiled, because he knew Charlie was feeding himself. And, beneath the clickety-clack and the chuffa-chuffa and the brump-hrump, he could hear Charlie singing his old song in his low, gruff voice:

Don't ask me silly questions,  
I won't play silly games,  
I'm just a simple choo-choo train  
And I'll always be the same.

I only want to race along  
Beneath the bright blue sky,  
And be a happy choo-choo train  
Until the day I die.

Charlie got Mr. Martin to his daughter's piano recital on time (of course), and Susannah was just tickled pink to see her old friend Charlie again (of course), and they all went back to St. Louis together with Susannah yanking hell out of the train-whistle the whole way. Mr. Martin got Charlie and Engineer Bob a gig pulling kids around the brand-new Mid-World Amusement Park and Fun Fair in California, and

you will find them there to this day, pulling laughing children hither and thither in that world of lights and music and good, wholesome fun. Engineer Bob's hair is white, and Charlie doesn't talk as much as he once did, but both of them still have plenty of zip and zowie, and every now and then the children hear Charlie singing his old song in his soft, gruff voice.

THE END

"Don't ask me silly questions, I won't play silly games," Jake mut-tered, looking at the final picture. It showed Charlie the Choo-Choo pulling two bunting-decked passenger cars filled with happy children from the roller coaster to the Ferns wheel. Engineer Bob sat in the cab, pulling the whistle-cord and looking as happy as a pig in shit. Jake sup-posed Engineer Bob's smile was supposed to convey supreme happiness, but to him it looked like the grin of a lunatic. Charlie and Engineer Bob both looked like lunatics . . . and the more Jake looked at the kids, the more he thought that their expressions looked like grimaces of terror. Let us off this train, those faces seemed to say. Please, just let us off this train alive.

And be a happy choo-choo train until the day I die.

Jake closed the book and looked at it thoughtfully. Then he opened it again and began to leaf through the pages, circling certain words and phrases that seemed

to call out to him.

The Mid-World Railway Company . . . Engineer Bob . . . a small, gruff voice . . .  
. WHOO-OOOO . . . the first real friend he'd had since his wife died, long ago,  
in New York . . . Mr. Martin . . . the world has moved on ... Susannah . . .

He put his pen down. Why did these words and phrases call to him? The one about New York seemed obvious enough, but what about the others? For that matter, why this book? That he had been meant to buy it was beyond question. If he hadn't had the money in his pocket, he felt sure he would have simply grabbed it and bolted from the store. But why? He felt like a compass needle. The needle knows nothing about magnetic north; it only knows it must point in a certain direction, like it or not.

The only thing Jake knew for sure was that he was very, very tired, and if he didn't crawl into bed soon, he was going to fall asleep at his desk. He took off his shirt, then gazed down at the front of Charlie the Choo-Choo again.

That smile. He just didn't trust that smile.

Not a bit.

23

SLEEP DIDN'T COME AS soon as Jake had hoped. The voices began to argue again about whether he was alive or dead, and they kept him awake. At last he sat up in bed with his eyes closed and his fisted hands planted against his temples.

Quit! he screamed at them. Just quit! You were gone all day, be gone again!

I would if he'd just admit I'm dead, one of the voices said sulkily.

I would if he'd just take a for God's sake look around and admit I'm clearly alive, the other snapped back.

He was going to scream right out loud. There was no way to hold it back; he could feel it coming up his throat like vomit. He opened his eyes, saw his pants lying over the seat of his desk chair, and an idea occurred to him. He got out of bed, went to the chair, and felt in the right front pocket of the pants.

The silver key was still there, and the moment his fingers closed around it, the voices ceased.

Tell him, he thought, with no idea who the thought was for. Tell him to grab the key. The key makes the voices go.

He went back to bed and was asleep with the key clasped loosely in his hand three minutes after his head hit the pillow.

### III • DOOR AND DEMON

•III•

### DOOR AND DEMON

1

EDDIE WAS ALMOST ASLEEP when a voice spoke clearly in his ear: Tell him to grab the key. The key makes the voices go.

He sat bolt upright, looking around wildly. Susannah was sound asleep beside him; that voice had not been hers.

Nor anyone else's, it seemed. They had been moving through the woods and along the path of the Beam for eight days now, and this evening they had camped in the deep cleft of a pocket valley. Close by on the left, a large stream roared brashly past, headed in the same direction as they were: southeast. To the right, firs rose up a steep slope of land. There were no intruders here; only Susannah asleep and Roland awake. He sat huddled beneath his blanket at the edge of the stream's cut, staring out into the darkness.

Tell him to grab the key. The key makes the voices go.

Eddie hesitated for only a moment. Roland's sanity was in the balance now, the balance was tipping the wrong way, and the worst part of it was this: no one knew it better than the man himself. At this point, Eddie was prepared to clutch at any straw.

He had been using a folded square of deerskin as a pillow. He reached beneath it and removed a bundle wrapped in a piece of hide. He walked over to Roland, and was disturbed to see that the gunslinger did not notice him until he was less than four steps from his unprotected back. There had been a time—and it was not so long ago—when Roland would have known Eddie was awake even before Eddie sat up. He would have heard the change in his breathing.

He was more alert than this back on the beach, when he was half-dead from the lobster-thing's bite, Eddie thought grimly.

Roland at last turned his head and glanced at him. His eyes were bright with pain and weariness, but Eddie recognized these things as no more than a surface glitter. Beneath it, he sensed a growing confusion that would almost surely become madness if it continued to develop unchecked. Pity tugged at Eddie's heart.

"Can't sleep?" Roland asked. His voice was slow, almost drugged.

"I almost was, and then I woke up," Eddie said. "Listen—"

"I think I'm getting ready to die." Roland looked at Eddie. The bright shine left his eyes, and now looking into them was like staring into a pair of deep, dark wells that seemed to have no bottom. Eddie shud-dered, more because of that empty stare than because of what Roland had said. "And do you know what I hope lies in the clearing where the path ends, Eddie?"

"Roland—"

"Silence," Roland said. He exhaled a dusty sigh. "Just silence. That will be enough. An end to ... this."

He planted his fists against his temples, and Eddie thought: I've seen someone else do that, and not long ago. But who? Where?

It was ridiculous of course; he had seen no one but Roland and Susannah for almost two months now. But it felt true, all the same.

"Roland, I've been making something," Eddie said.

Roland nodded. A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "I know. What is it? Are you finally ready to tell?"

"I think it might be part of this ka-tet thing."

The vacant look left Roland's eyes. He gazed at Eddie thoughtfully but said nothing.

"Look." Eddie began to unfold the piece of hide.

That won't do any good! Henry's voice suddenly brayed. It was so loud that Eddie actually flinched a little. It's just a stupid piece of wood-carving! He'll take one look and laugh at it! He'll laugh at you! "Oh, lookit this!" he'll say. "Did the sissy carve something?"

"Shut up," Eddie muttered.

The gunslinger raised his eyebrows.

"Not you."

Roland nodded, unsurprised. "Your brother comes to you often, doesn't he, Eddie?"

For a moment Eddie only stared at him, his carving still hidden in the hide square. Then he smiled. It was not a very pleasant smile. "Not as often as he used to, Roland. Thank Christ for small favors."

"Yes," Roland said. "Too many voices weigh heavy on a man's heart . . . What is it, Eddie? Show me, please."

Eddie held up the chunk of ash. The key, almost complete, emerged from it like

the head of a woman from the prow of a sailing ship ... or the hilt of a sword from a chunk of stone. Eddie didn't know how close he had come to duplicating the key-shape he had seen in the fire (and never would, he supposed, unless he found the right lock in which to try it), but he thought it was close. Of one thing he was quite sure: it was the best carving he had ever done. By far.

"By the gods, Eddie, it's beautiful!" Roland said. The apathy was gone from his voice; he spoke in a tone of surprised reverence Eddie had never heard before.

"Is it done? It's not, is it?"

"No—not quite." He ran his thumb into the third notch, and then over the s-shape at the end of the last notch. "There's a little more to do on this notch, and the curve at the end isn't right yet. I don't know how I know that, but I do."

"This is your secret." It wasn't a question.

"Yes. Now if only I knew what it meant."

Roland looked around. Eddie followed his gaze and saw Susannah. He found some relief in the fact that Roland had heard her first.

"What you boys doin up so late? Chewin the fat?" She saw the wooden key in Eddie's hand and nodded. "I wondered when you were going to get around to showing that off. It's good, you know. I don't know what it's for, but it's damned good."

"You don't have any idea what door it might open?" Roland asked Eddie. "That was not part of your khéf?"

"No—but it might be good for something even though it isn't done." He held the key out to Roland. "I want you to keep it for me."

Roland didn't move to take it. He regarded Eddie closely. "Why?"

"Because . . . well. . . because I think someone told me you should."

"Who?"

Your boy, Eddie thought suddenly, and as soon as the thought came he knew it was true. It was your goddamned boy. But he didn't want to say so. He didn't want to mention the boy's name at all. It might just set Roland off again.

"I don't know. But I think you ought to give it a try."

Roland reached slowly for the key. As his fingers touched it, a bright glimmer seemed to flash down its barrel, but it was gone so quickly that Eddie could not be sure he had seen it. It might have been only starlight.

Roland's hand closed over the key growing out of the branch. For a moment his face showed nothing. Then his brow furrowed and his head cocked in a listening gesture.

"What is it?" Susannah asked. "Do you hear—"

"Shhhh!" The puzzlement on Roland's face was slowly being replaced with wonder. He looked from Eddie to Susannah and then back to Eddie. His eyes were filling with some great emotion, as a pitcher fills with water when it is dipped in a spring.

"Roland?" Eddie asked uneasily. "Are you all right?"

Roland whispered something. Eddie couldn't hear what it was.

Susannah looked scared. She glanced frantically at Eddie, as if to ask, What did you do to him?

Eddie took one of her hands in both of his own. "I think it's all right."

Roland's hand was clamped so tightly on the chunk of wood that Eddie was momentarily afraid he might snap it in two, but the wood was strong and Eddie had carved thick. The gunslinger's throat bulged; his Adam's apple rose and fell

as he struggled with speech. And suddenly he yelled at the sky in a fair, strong voice:

"GONE! THE VOICES ARE GONE!"

He looked back at them, and Eddie saw something he had never expected to see in his life—not even if that life stretched over a thousand years.

Roland of Gilead was weeping.

2

THE GUNSLINGER SLEPT SOUNDLY and dreamlessly that night for the first time in months, and he slept with the not-quite finished key clenched tightly in his hand.

3

IN ANOTHER WORLD, BUT beneath the shadow of the same ka-tet, Jake Chambers was having the most vivid dream of his life.

He was walking through the tangled remains of an ancient forest— a dead zone of fallen trees and scruffy, aggravating bushes that bit his ankles and tried to steal his sneakers. He came to a thin belt of younger trees (alders, he thought, or perhaps beeches—he was a city boy, and the only thing he knew for sure about trees was that some had leaves and some had needles) and discovered a path through them. He made his way along this, moving a little faster. There was a clearing of some sort up ahead.

He stopped once before reaching it, when he spied some sort of stone marker to his right. He left the path to look at it. There were letters carved into it, but they were so eroded he couldn't make them out. At last he closed his eyes (he had never done this in a dream before) and let his fingers trace each letter, like a blind boy reading Braille. Each formed in the darkness behind his lids until they made a sentence which stood forth in an outline of blue light:

TRAVELLER, BEYOND LIES MID-WORLD.

Sleeping in his bed, Jake drew his knees up against his chest. The hand holding the key was under his pillow, and now his fingers tightened their grip on it. Mid-World, he thought, of course. St. Louis and Topeka and Oz and the World's Fair and Charlie the Choo-Choo.

He opened his dreaming eyes and pressed on. The clearing behind the trees was paved with old cracked asphalt. A faded yellow circle had been painted in the middle. Jake realized it was a playground basketball court even before he saw the boy at the far end, standing at the foul line and shooting baskets with a dusty old Wilson ball. They popped in one after another, falling neatly through the netless hole. The basket jutted out from something that looked like a subway kiosk which had been shut up for the night. Its closed door was painted in alternating diagonal stripes of yellow and black. From behind it—or perhaps from below it—Jake could hear the steady rumble of powerful machinery. The sound was somehow disturbing. Scary.

Don't step on the robots, the boy shooting the baskets said without turning around. I guess they're all dead, but I wouldn't take any chances, if I were

you.

Jake looked around and saw a number of shattered mechanical devices lying around. One looked like a rat or mouse, another like a bat. A mechanical snake lay in two rusty pieces almost at his feet.

ARE you me? Jake asked, taking a step closer to the boy at the basket, but even before he turned around, Jake knew that wasn't the case. The boy was bigger than Jake, and at least thirteen. His hair was darker, and when he looked at Jake, he saw that the stranger's eyes were hazel. His own were blue.

What do you think? the strange boy asked, and bounce-passed the ball to Jake.

No, of course not, Jake said. He spoke apologetically. It's just that I've been cut in two for the last three weeks or so. He dipped and shot from mid-court.

The ball arched high and dropped silently through the hoop. He was delighted . . .

. . . but he discovered he was also afraid of what this strange boy might have to tell him.

I know, the boy said. It's been a bitch for you, hasn't it? He was wearing faded madras shorts and a yellow t-shirt that said NEVER A DULL MOMENT IN MID-WORLD.

He had tied a green bandanna around his forehead to keep his hair out of his eyes. And things are going to get worse before they get better.

What is this place? Jake asked. And who are you?

It's the Portal of the Bear . . . but it's also Brooklyn.

That didn't seem to make sense, and yet somehow it did. Jake told himself that things always seemed that way in dreams, but this didn't really feel like a dream.

As for me, I don't matter much, the boy said. He hooked the basket-ball over his shoulder. It rose, then dropped smoothly through the hoop. I'm supposed to guide you, that's all. I'll take you where you need to go, and I'll show you what you need to see, but you have to be careful because I won't know you. And strangers make Henry nervous. He can get mean when he's nervous, and he's bigger than you.

Who's Henry? Jake asked.

Never mind. Just don't let him notice you. All you have to do is hang out . . . and follow us. Then, when we leave . . .

The boy looked at Jake. There was both pity and fear in his eyes. Jake suddenly realized that the boy was starting to fade—like could see the yellow and black slashes on the box right through the boy's yellow t-shirt.

How will I find you? Jake was suddenly terrified that the boy would melt away completely before he could say everything Jake needed to hear.

No problem, the boy said. His voice had taken on a queer, chiming echo. Just take the subway to Co-Op City. You'll find me.

No, I won't! Jake cried. Co-Op City's huge! There must be a hundred thousand people living there!

Now the boy was just a milky outline. Only his hazel eyes were still completely there, like the Cheshire cat's grin in Alice. They regarded Jake with compassion and anxiety. No problem-o, he said. You found the key and the rose, didn't you? You'll find me the same way. This afternoon, Jake. Around three o'clock should be good. You'll have to be careful, and you'll have to be quick. He paused, a ghostly boy with an old basketball lying near one transparent foot. I have to go now . . . but it was good to meet you. You seem like a nice kid, and I'm riot surprised he loves you. Remember, there's danger, though. Be careful . . . and be quick.

Wait! Jake yelled, and run across the basketball court toward the disappearing boy. One of his feet struck a shattered robot that looked like a child's toy tractor. He stumbled and fell to his knees, shredding his pants. He ignored the thin burn of pain. Wait! You have to tell me what all this is about! You have to tell me why these things are happening to me!

Because of the Beam, the boy who was now only a pair of floating eyes replied, and because of the Tower. In the end, all things, even the Beams, serve the Dark Tower. Did you think you would be any different?

Jake flailed and stumbled to his feet. Will I find him? Will I find the gunslinger?

I don't know, the boy answered. His voice now seemed to come from a million miles away. I only know you must try. About that you have no choice.

The boy was gone. The basketball court in the woods was empty. The only sound was that faint rumble of machinery, and Jake didn't like it. There was something wrong with that sound, and he thought that what was wrong with the machinery was affecting the rose, or vice-versa. It was all hooked together somehow.

He picked up the old, scuffed-up basketball and shot. It went neatly through the hoop . . . and disappeared.

A river, the strange boy's voice sighed. It was like a puff of breeze. It came from nowhere and everywhere. The answer is a river.

4

JAKE WOKE IN THE first milky light of dawn, looking up at the ceiling of his room. He was thinking of the guy in The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind—Aaron Deepneau, who'd been hanging around on Bleecker Street back when Bob Dylan only knew how to blow open G on his Hohner. Aaron Deepneau had given Jake a 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?

Now he knew the answer. A river ran; a river had a mouth; a river had a bed; a river had a head. The boy had told him the answer. The boy in the dream. And suddenly he thought of something else Deepneau had said: That's only half the answer. Samson's riddle is a double, my friend.

Jake glanced at his bedside clock and saw it was twenty past six. It was time to get moving if he wanted to be out of here before his parents woke up. There would be no school for him today; Jake thought that maybe, as far as he was concerned, school had been cancelled forever.

He threw back the bedclothes, swung his feet out onto the floor, and saw that there were scrapes on both knees. Fresh scrapes. He had bruised his left side yesterday when he slipped on the bricks and fell, and he had banged his head when he fainted near the rose, but nothing had happened to his knees.

"That happened in the dream," Jake whispered, and found he wasn't surprised at all. He began to dress swiftly.



5

IN THE BACK OF his closet, under a jumble of old laceless sneakers and a heap of Spiderman comic books, he found the packsack he had worn to grammar school. No one would be caught dead with a packsack at Piper—how too, too common, my death—and as Jake grabbed it, he felt a wave of powerful nostalgia for those old days when life had seemed so simple.

He stuffed a clean shirt, a clean pair of jeans, some underwear and socks into it, then added Riddle-De-Dum! and Charlie the Choo-Choo. He had put the key on his desk before foraging in the closet for his old pack, and the voices came back at once, but they were distant and muted. Besides, he felt sure he could make them go away completely by holding the key again, and that eased his mind. Okay, he thought, looking into the pack. Even with the books added, there was plenty of room left. What else?

For a moment he thought there was nothing else . . . and then he knew.

6

His FATHER'S STUDY SMELLED of cigarettes and ambition.

It was dominated by a huge teakwood desk. Across the room, set into a wall otherwise lined with books, were three Mitsubishi television monitors. Each was tuned to one of the rival networks, and at night, when his father was in here, each played out its progression of prime-time images with the sound off.

The curtains were drawn, and Jake had to turn on the desk lamp in order to see. He felt nervous just being in here, even wearing sneakers. If his father should wake up and come in (and it was possible; no matter how late he went to bed or how much he drank, Elmer Chambers was a light sleeper and an early riser), he would be angry. At the very least it would make a clean getaway much tougher. The sooner he was out of here, the better Jake would feel.

The desk was locked, but his father had never made any secret of where he kept the key. Jake slid his fingers under the blotter and hooked it out. He opened the third drawer, reached past the hanging files, and touched cold metal.

A board creaked in the hall and he froze. Several seconds passed. When the creak didn't come again, Jake pulled out the weapon his father kept for "home defense"—a .44 Ruger automatic. His father had shown this weapon to Jake with great pride on the day he had bought it—two years ago, that had been. He had been totally deaf to his wife's nervous demands that he put it away before someone got hurt.

Jake found the button on the side that released the clip. It fell out into his hand with a metallic *snak!* sound that seemed very loud in the quiet apartment. He glanced nervously toward the door again, then turned his attention to the clip. It was fully loaded. He started to slide it back into the gun, and then took it out again. Keeping a loaded gun in a locked desk drawer was one thing; carrying one around New York City was quite another.

He stuffed the automatic down to the bottom of his pack, then felt behind the hanging files again. This time he brought out a box of shells, about half-full. He remembered his father had done some target shooting at the police range on First Avenue before losing interest.

The board creaked again. Jake wanted to get out of here.

He removed one of the shirts he'd packed, laid it on his father's desk, and

rolled up the clip and the box of .44 slugs in it. Then he replaced it in the pack and used the buckles to snug down the flap. He was about to leave when his eye fixed on the little pile of stationery sitting beside his father's In/Out tray. The reflectorized Ray-Ban sunglasses his father liked to wear were folded on top of the stationery. He took a sheet of paper, and, after a moment's thought, the sunglasses as well. He slipped the shades into his breast pocket. Then he removed the slim gold pen from its stand, and wrote Dear Dad and Mom beneath the letterhead.

He stopped, frowning at the salutation. What went below it? What, exactly, did he have to say? That he loved them? It was true, but it wasn't enough—there were all sorts of other unpleasant truths stuck through that central one, like steel needles jabbed into a ball of yarn.

That he would miss them? He didn't know if that was true or not, which was sort of horrible. That he hoped they would miss him?

He suddenly realized what the problem was. If he were planning to be gone just today, he would be able to write something. But he felt a near-certainty that it wasn't just today, or this week, or this month, or this summer. He had an idea that when he walked out of the apartment this time, it would be for good.

He almost crumpled the sheet of paper, then changed his mind. He wrote: Please take care of yourselves. Love, J. That was pretty limp, but at least it was something.

Fine. Now will you stop pressing your luck and get out of here?

He did.

The apartment was almost dead still. He tiptoed across the living room, hearing only the sounds of his parents' breathing: his mother's soft little snores, his father's more nasal respiration, where every indrawn breath ended in a slim high whistle. The refrigerator kicked on as he reached the entryway and he froze for a moment, his heart thumping hard in his chest. Then he was at the door. He unlocked it as quietly as he could, then stepped out and pulled it gently shut behind him.

A stone seemed to roll off his heart as the latch snicked, and a strong sense of anticipation seized him. He didn't know what lay ahead, and he had reason to believe it would be dangerous, but he was eleven years old—too young to deny the exotic delight which suddenly filled him. There was a highway ahead—a hidden highway leading deep into some unknown land. There were secrets which might disclose themselves to him if he was clever . . . and if he was lucky. He had left his home in the long light of dawn, and what lay ahead was some great adventure.

If I stand, if I can be true, I'll see the rose, he thought as he pushed the button for the elevator. I know it . . . and I'll see him, too.

This thought filled him with an eagerness so great it was almost ecstasy.

Three minutes later he stepped out from beneath the awning which shaded the entrance to the building where he had lived all his life. He paused for a moment, then turned left. This decision did not feel random, and it wasn't. He was moving southeast, along the path of the Beam, resuming his own interrupted quest for the Dark Tower.

TWO DAYS AFTER EDDIE had given Roland his unfinished key, the three travellers—hot, sweaty, tired, and out of sorts—pushed through a particularly tenacious tangle of bushes and second-growth trees and discovered what first appeared to be two faint paths, running in tandem beneath the interlacing branches of the old trees crowding close on either side. After a few moments of study, Eddie decided they weren't just paths but the remains of a long-abandoned road. Bushes and stunted trees grew like untidy quills along what had been its crown. The grassy indentations were wheelruts, and either of them was wide enough to accommodate Susannah's wheelchair.

"Hallelujah!" he cried. "Let's drink to it!"

Roland nodded and unslung the waterskin he wore around his waist. He first handed it up to Susannah, who was riding in her sling on his back. Eddie's key, now looped around Roland's neck on a piece of raw-hide, shifted beneath his shirt with each movement. She took a swallow and passed the skin to Eddie. He drank and then began to unfold her chair. Eddie had come to hate this bulky, balky contraption; it was like an iron anchor, always holding them back. Except for a broken spoke or two, it was still in fine condition. Eddie had days when he thought the goddam thing would outlast all of them. Now, however, it might be useful ... for a while, at least.

Eddie helped Susannah out of the harness and placed her in the chair. She put her hands against the small of her back, stretched, and grimaced with pleasure. Both Eddie and Roland heard the small crackle her spine made as it stretched. Up ahead, a large creature that looked like a badger crossed with a raccoon ambled out of the woods. It looked at them with its large, gold-rimmed eyes, twitched its sharp, whiskery snout as if to say Huh! Big deal!, then strolled the rest of the way across the road and disappeared again. Before it did, Eddie noted its tail—long and closely coiled, it looked like a fur-covered bedspring.

"What was that, Roland?"

"A billy-bumbler."

"No good to eat?"

Roland shook his head. "Tough. Sour. I'd rather eat dog."

"Have you?" Susannah asked. "Eaten dog, I mean?"

Roland nodded, but did not elaborate. Eddie found himself thinking of a line from an old Paul Newman movie: That's right, lady—eaten em and lived like one. Birds sang cheerily in the trees. A light breeze blew along the road. Eddie and Susannah turned their faces up to it gratefully, then looked at each other and smiled. Eddie was struck again by his gratitude for her—it was scary to have someone to love, but it was also very fine.

"Who made this road?" Eddie asked.

"People who have been gone a long time," Roland said.

"The same ones who made the cups and dishes we found?" Susannah asked.

"No—not them. This used to be a coach-road, I imagine, and if it's still here, after all these years of neglect, it must have been a great one indeed . . . perhaps the Great Road. If we dug down, I imagine we'd find the gravel undersurface, and maybe the drainage system, as well. As long as we're here, let's have a bite to eat."

"Food!" Eddie cried. "Bring it on! Chicken Florentine! Polynesian shrimp! Veal lightly sautéed with mushrooms and—"

Susannah elbowed him. "Quit it, white boy."

"I can't help it if I've got a vivid imagination," Eddie said cheerfully. Roland slipped his purse off his shoulder, hunkered down, and began to put together a small noon meal of dried meat wrapped in olive-colored leaves. Eddie and Susannah had discovered that these leaves tasted a little like spinach, only much stronger.

Eddie wheeled Susannah over to him and Roland handed her three of what Eddie called "gunslinger burritos." She began to eat.

When Eddie turned back, Roland was holding out three of the wrapped pieces of meat to him—and something else, as well. It was the chunk of ash with the key growing out of it. Roland had taken it off the rawhide string, which now lay in an open loop around his neck.

"Hey, you need that, don't you?" Eddie asked.

"When I take it off, the voices return, but they're very distant," Roland said.

"I can deal with them. Actually, I hear them even when I'm wearing it—like the voices of men who are speaking low over the next hill. I think that's because the key is yet unfinished. You haven't worked on it since you gave it to me."

"Well . . . you were wearing it, and I didn't want to ..."

Roland said nothing, but his faded blue eyes regarded Eddie with their patient teacher's look.

"All right," Eddie said, "I'm afraid of fucking it up. Satisfied?"

"According to your brother, you fucked everything up ... isn't that right?" Susannah asked.

"Susannah Dean, Girl Psychologist. You missed your calling, sweetheart."

Susannah wasn't offended by the sarcasm. She lifted the waterskin with her elbow, like a redneck tipping a jug, and drank deeply. "It's true, though, isn't it?"

Eddie, who realized he hadn't finished the slingshot, either—not yet, at least—shrugged.

"You have to finish it," Roland said mildly. "I think the time is coming when you'll have to put it to use."

Eddie started to speak, then closed his mouth. It sounded easy when you said it right out like that, but neither of them really understood the bottom line. The bottom line was this: seventy per cent or eighty or even ninety-eight and a half just wouldn't do. Not this time. And if he did screw up, he couldn't just toss the thing over his shoulder and walk away. For one thing, he hadn't seen another ash-tree since the day he had cut this particular piece of wood. But mostly the thing that was fucking him up was just this: it was all or nothing. If he messed up even a little, the key wouldn't turn when they needed it to turn. And he was increasingly nervous about that little squiggle at the end. It looked simple, but if the curves weren't exactly right . . .

It won't work the way it is now, though; that much you do know.

He sighed, looking at the key. Yes, that much he did know. He would have to try to finish it. His fear of failure would make it even harder than it maybe had to be, but he would have to swallow the fear and try anyway. Maybe he could even bring it off. God knew he had brought off a lot in the weeks since Roland had entered his mind on a Delta jet bound into JFK Airport. That he was still alive and sane was an accomplishment in itself.

Eddie handed the key back to Roland. "Wear it for now," he said. "I'll go back to work when we stop for the night."

"Promise?"

"Yeah."

Roland nodded, took the key, and began to re-knot the rawhide string. He worked slowly, but Eddie did not fail to notice how dexterously the remaining fingers on his right hand moved. The man was nothing if not adaptable.

"Something is going to happen, isn't it?" Susannah asked suddenly.

Eddie glanced up at her. "What makes you say so?"

"I sleep with you, Eddie, and I know you dream every night now. Sometimes you talk, too. They don't seem like nightmares, exactly, but it's pretty clear that something is going on inside your head."

"Yes. Something is. I just don't know what."

"Dreams are powerful," Roland remarked. "You don't remember the ones you're having at all?"

Eddie hesitated. "A little, but they're confused. I'm a kid again, I know that much. It's after school. Henry and I are shooting hoops at the old Markey Avenue playground, where the Juvenile Court Building is now. I want Henry to take me to see a place over in Dutch Hill. An old house. The kids used to call it The Mansion, and everyone said it was haunted. Maybe it even was. It was creepy, I know that much. Real creepy."

Eddie shook his head, remembering.

"I thought of The Mansion for the first time in years when we were in the bear's clearing, and I put my head close to that weird box. I dunno—maybe that's why I'm having the dream."

"But you don't think so," Susannah said.

"No. I think whatever's happening is a lot more complicated than just remembering stuff."

"Did you and your brother actually go to this place?" Roland asked.

"Yeah—I talked him into it."

"And did something happen?"

"No. But it was scary. We stood there and looked at it for a little while, and Henry teased me—saying he was going to make me go in and pick up a souvenir, stuff like that—but I knew he didn't really mean it. He was as scared of the place as I was."

"And that's it?" Susannah asked. "You just dream of going to this place? The Mansion?"

"There's a little more than that. Someone comes . . . and then just land of hangs out. I notice him in the dream, but just a little . . . like out of the corner of my eye, you know? Only I know we're supposed to pretend we don't know each other."

"Was this someone really there that day?" Roland asked. He was watching Eddie intently, "Or is he only a player in this dream?"

"That was a long time ago. I couldn't have been more than thirteen. How could I remember a thing like that for sure?"

Roland said nothing.

"Okay," Eddie said at last. "Yeah. I think he was there that day. A kid who was either carrying a gym-bag or wearing a backpack, I can't remember which. And sunglasses that were too big for his face. The ones with the mirror lenses."

"Who was this person?" Roland asked.

Eddie was silent for a long time. He was holding the last of his burritos a la

Roland in one hand, but he had lost his appetite. "I think it's the kid you met at the way station," he said at last. "I think your old friend Jake was hanging around, watching me and Henry on the afternoon we went over to Dutch Hill. I think he followed us. Because he hears the voices, just like you, Roland. And because he's sharing my dreams, and I'm sharing his. I think that what I remember is what's happening now, in Jake's when. The kid is trying to come back here. And if the key isn't done when he makes his move—or if it's done wrong—he's probably going to die."

Roland said, "Maybe he has a key of his own. Is that possible?"

"Yeah, I think it is," Eddie said, "but it isn't enough." He sighed and stuck the last burrito in his pocket for later. "And I don't think he knows that."

8

THEY MOVED ALONG, ROLAND and Eddie trading off on Susannah's wheelchair. They picked the left-hand wheelrut. The chair bumped and pitched, and every now and then Eddie and Roland had to lift it over the cobbles which stuck out of the dirt here and there like old teeth. They were still making faster, easier time than they had in a week, how-ever. The ground was rising, and when Eddie looked over his shoulder he could see the forest sloping away in what looked like a series of gentle steps. Far to the northwest, he could see a ribbon of water spilling over a fractured rock face. It was, he realized with wonder, the place they had dubbed "the shooting gallery." Now it was almost lost behind them in the haze of this dreaming summer afternoon.

"Whoa down, boy!" Susannah called sharply. Eddie faced forward again just in time to keep from pushing the wheelchair into Roland. The gunslinger had stopped and was peering into the tangled bushes at the left of the road.

"You keep that up, I'm gonna revoke your driver's license," Susannah said waspily.

Eddie ignored her. He was following Roland's gaze. "What is it?"

"One way to find out." He turned, hoisted Susannah from her chair, ~and planted her on his hip. "Let's all take a look."

"Put me down, big boy—I can make my way. Easier'n you boys, if you really want to know."

As Roland gently lowered her to the grassy wheelrut, Eddie peered into the woods. The late light threw overlapping crosses of shadow, but he thought he saw what had caught Roland's eye. It was a tall gray stone, almost completely hidden in a shag of vines and creepers.

Susannah slipped into the woods at the side of the road with eely sinuousness.

Roland and Eddie followed.

"It's a marker, isn't it?" Susannah was propped on her hands study-ing die rectangular chunk of rock. It had once been straight, but now it leaned drunkenly to the right, like an old gravestone.

"Yes. Give me my knife, Eddie."

Eddie handed it over, then hunkered next to Susannah as the gun-slinger cut away the vines. As they fell, he could see eroded letters carved into the stone, and he knew what they said before Roland had uncovered even half of the inscription:

TRAVELLER, BEYOND LIES MID-WORLD.

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN?" Susannah asked at last. Her voice was soft and awestruck; her eyes ceaselessly measured the gray stone plinth.

"It means that we're nearing the end of this first stage." Roland's face was solemn and thoughtful as he handed his knife back to Eddie. "I think that we'll keep to this old coach-road now—or rather, it will keep to us. It has taken up the path of the Beam. The woods will end soon. I expect a great change."

"What is Mid-World?" Eddie asked.

"One of the large kingdoms which dominated the earth in the times before these. A kingdom of hope and knowledge and light—the sort of things we were trying to hold onto in my land before the darkness over-took us, as well. Some day if there's time, I'll tell you all the old stories . . . the ones I know, at least.

They form a large tapestry, one which is beautiful but very sad.

"According to the old tales, a great city once stood at the edge of Mid-World—perhaps as great as your city of New York. It will be in ruins now, if it still exists at all. But there may be people ... or monsters ... or both.

We'll have to be on our guard."

He reached out his two-fingered right hand and touched the inscription.

"Mid-World," he said in a low, meditative voice. "Who would have thought . . ."

He trailed off.

"Well, there's no help for it, is there?" Eddie asked.

The gunslinger shook his head. "No help."

"Ka," Susannah said suddenly, and they both looked at her.

THERE WERE TWO HOURS of daylight left, and so they moved on. The road continued southeast, along the path of the Beam, and two other overgrown roads—smaller ones—joined the one they were following. Along one side of the second were the mossy, tumbled remains of what must have once been an immense rock wall. Nearby, a dozen fat billy-bumblers sat upon the ruins, watching the pilgrims with their odd gold-ringed eyes. To Eddie they looked like a jury with hanging on its mind. The road continued to grow wider and more clearly defined. Twice they passed the shells of long-deserted buildings. The second one, Roland said, might have been a windmill. Susannah said it looked haunted. "I wouldn't be surprised," the gunslinger replied. His matter-of-fact tone chilled both of them.

When darkness forced a halt, the trees were thinning and the breeze which had chased around tin-in all day became a light, warm wind. Ahead, the land continued to rise.

"We'll come to the top of the ridge in a day or two," Roland said. "Then we'll see."

"See what?" Susannah asked, but Roland only shrugged.

That night Eddie began to carve again, but with no real feeling of inspiration. The confidence and happiness he'd felt as the key first began to take shape had left him. His fingers felt clumsy and stupid. For the first time in months he thought longingly of how good it would be to have some heroin. Not a lot; he felt sure that a nickel bag and a rolled-up dollar bill would send him flying

through this little carving project in no time flat.

"What are you smiling about, Eddie?" Roland asked. He was sitting on the other side of the campfire; the low, wind-driven flames danced capriciously between them.

"Was I smiling?"

"Yes."

"I was just thinking about how stupid some people can be—you put them in a room with six doors, they'll still walk into the walls. And then have the nerve to bitch about it."

"If you're afraid of what might be on the other side of the doors, maybe bouncing off the walls seems safer," Susannah said.

Eddie nodded. "Maybe so."

He worked slowly, trying to see the shapes in the wood—that little s-shape in particular. He discovered it had become very dim.

Please, God, help me not to fuck this up, he thought, but he was terribly afraid that he had already begun to do just that. At last he gave up, returned the key (which he had barely changed at all) to the gun-slinger, and curled up beneath one of the hides. Five minutes later, the dream about the boy and the old Markey Avenue playground had begun to unspool again.

11

JAKE STEPPED OUT OF his apartment building at about quarter of seven, which left him with over eight hours to kill. He considered taking the train out to Brooklyn right away, then decided it was a bad idea. A kid out of school was apt to attract more attention in the hinterlands than in the heart of a big city, and if he really had to search for the place and the boy he was supposed to meet there, he was cooked already.

No problem-o, the boy in the yellow T-shirt and green bandanna had said. You found the key and the rose, didn't you? You'll find me the same way.

Except Jake could no longer remember just how he had found the key and the rose. He could only remember the joy and the sense of surety which had filled his heart and head. He would just have to hope that would happen again. In the meantime, he'd keep moving. That was the best way to keep from being noticed in New York.

He walked most of the way to First Avenue, then headed back the way he had come, only sliding uptown little by little as he followed the pattern of the WALK lights (perhaps knowing, on some deep level, that even they served the Beam). Around ten o'clock he found himself in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue. He was hot, tired, and depressed. He wanted a soda, but he thought he ought to hold onto what little money he had for as long as he could. He'd taken every cent out of the box he kept by his bed, but it only amounted to eight dollars, give or take a few cents.

A group of school-kids were lining up for a tour. Public school, Jake was almost sure—they were dressed as casually as he was. No blazers from Paul Stuart, no ties, no jumpers, no simple little skirts that cost a hundred and twenty-five bucks at places like Miss So Pretty or Tweenity. This crowd was Kmart all the way. On impulse, Jake stood at the end of the line and followed them into the museum.



The tour took an hour and fifteen minutes. Jake enjoyed it. The museum was quiet. Even better, it was air-conditioned. And the pictures were nice. He was particularly fascinated by a small group of Frederick Remington's Old West paintings and a large picture by Thomas Hart Benton that showed a steam locomotive chugging across the great plains toward Chicago while beefy farmers in bib overalls and straw hats stood in their fields and watched. He wasn't noticed by either of the teachers with the group until the very end. Then a pretty black woman in a severe blue suit tapped him on the shoulder and asked who he was.

Jake hadn't seen her coming, and for a moment his mind froze. Without thinking about what he was doing, he reached into his pocket and closed his hand around the silver key. His mind cleared immediately, and he felt calm again.

"My group is upstairs," he said, smiling guiltily. "We're supposed to be looking at a bunch of modern art, but I like the stuff down here a lot better, because they're real pictures. So I sort of ... you know . . ."

"Snuck away?" the teacher suggested. The corners of her lips twitched in a suppressed smile.

"Well, I'd rather think of it as French leave." These words simply popped out of his mouth.

The students now staring at Jake only looked puzzled, but this time the teacher actually laughed. "Either you don't know or have forgotten," she said, "but in the French Foreign Legion they used to shoot deserters. I suggest you rejoin your class at once, young man."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you. They'll be almost done now, anyway."

"What school is it?"

"Markey Academy," Jake said. This also just popped out.

He went upstairs, listening to the disembodied echo of foot-falls and low voices in the great space of the rotunda and wondering why he had said that. He had never heard of a place called Markey Academy in his life.

12

HE WAITED AWHILE IN the upstairs lobby, then noticed a guard looking at him with growing curiosity and decided it wouldn't be wise to wait any longer—he would just have to hope the class he had joined briefly was gone.

He looked at his wristwatch, put an expression on his face that he hoped looked like Gosh! Look how late it's getting!, and trotted back downstairs. The class—and the pretty black teacher who had laughed at the idea of French leave—was gone, and Jake decided it might be a good idea to get gone himself. He would walk awhile longer—slowly, in deference to the heat—and catch a subway. He stopped at a hot-dog stand on the corner of Broadway and Forty-second, trading in a little of his meager cash supply for a sweet sausage and a Nehi. He sat on the steps of a bank building to eat his lunch, and that turned out to be a bad mistake.

A cop came walking toward him, twirling his nightstick in a complex series of maneuvers. He seemed to be paying attention to nothing but this, but when he came abreast of Jake he abruptly shoved his stick back into his loop and turned to him.

"Say-hey, big guy," he said. "No school today?"

Jake had been wolfing his sausage, but the last bite abruptly stuck in his throat. This was a lousy piece of luck ... if luck was all it was. They were in Times Square, sleaze capital of America; there were push-ers, junkies, whores, and chicken-chasers everywhere . . . but this cop was ignoring them in favor of him.

Jake swallowed with an effort, then said, "It's finals week at my school. I only had one test today. Then I could leave." He paused, not liking the bright, searching look in the cop's eyes. "I had permission," he concluded uneasily. "Uh-huh. Can I see some ID?"

Jake's heart sank. Had his mother and father already called the cops? He supposed that, after yesterday's adventure, that was pretty likely. Under ordinary circumstances, the NYPD wouldn't take much notice of another missing kid, especially one that had been gone only half a day, but his father was a big deal at the Network, and he prided himself on the number of strings he could pull. Jake doubted if this cop had his picture . . . but he might very well have his name.

"Well," Jake said reluctantly, "I've got my student discount card from Mid-World Lanes, but that's about all."

"Mid-World Lanes? Never heard of it. Where's that? Queens?"

"Mid-Town, I mean," Jake thought. God, this was going north instead of south . . . and fast. "You know? On Thirty-third?"

"Uh-huh. That'll do fine." The cop held out his hand.

A black man with dreadlocks spilling over the shoulders of his canary-yellow suit glanced over. "Bussim, ossifer!" this apparition said cheerfully. "Bussiz lil whitebread ass! Do yo duty, now!"

"Shut up and get in the wind, Eli," the cop said without looking around.

Eli laughed, exposing several gold teeth, and moved along.

"Why don't you ask him for some ID?" Jake asked.

"Because right now I'm asking you. Snap it up, son."

The cop either had his name or had sensed something wrong about him—which wasn't so surprising, maybe, since he was the only white in the area who wasn't obviously trolling. Either way, it came to the same: sitting down here to eat his lunch had been dumb. But his feet had hurt, and he'd been hungry, dammit—hungry.

You're not going to stop me, Jake thought. / can't let you stop me. There's someone I'm supposed to meet this afternoon in Brooklyn . . . and I'm going to be there.

Instead of reaching for his wallet, he reached into his front pocket and brought out the key. He held it up to the policeman; the late-morning sunshine bounced little coins of reflected light onto the man's cheeks and forehead. His eyes widened.

"Heyy!" he breathed. "What you got there, kid?"

He reached for it, and Jake pulled the key back a little. The reflected circles of light danced hypnotically on the cop's face. "You don't need to take it,"

Jake said. "You can read my name without doing that, can't you?"

"Yes, sure."

The curiosity had left the cop's face. He looked only at the key. His gaze was wide and fixed, but not quite empty. Jake read both amazement and unexpected happiness in his look. That's me, Jake thought, just spread-ing joy and goodwill

wherever I go. The question is, what do I do now?

A young woman (probably not a librarian, judging from the green silk hotpants and see-through blouse she was wearing) came wiggle-wob-bling up the sidewalk on a pair of purple fuck-me shoes with three-inch heels. She glanced first at the cop, then at Jake to see what the cop was looking at. When she got a good look, she stopped cold. One of her hands drifted up and touched her throat. A man bumped into her and told her to watch where the damn-hell she was going. The young woman who was probably not a librarian took no notice whatever. Now Jake saw that four or five other people had stopped as well. All were staring at the key. They were gathering as people sometimes will around a very good three-card-monte dealer plying his trade on a streetcorner.

You're doing a great job of being inconspicuous, he thought. Oh yeah. He glanced over the cop's shoulder, and his eye caught a sign on the far side of the street. Denby's Discount Drug, it said.

"My name's Tom Denby," he told the cop. "It says so right here on my discount bowling card—right?"

"Right, right," the cop breathed. He had lost all interest in Jake; he was only interested in the key. The little coins of reflected light bounced and spun on his face.

"And you're not looking for anybody named Tom Denby, are you?"

"No," the cop said. "Never heard of him."

Now there were at least half a dozen people gathered around the cop, all of them staring with silent wonder at the silver key in Jake's hand.

"So I can go, can't I?"

"Huh? Oh! Oh, sure—go, for your father's sake!"

"Thanks," Jake said, but for a moment he wasn't sure how to go. He was hemmed in by a silent crowd of zombies, and more were joining it all the time. They were only coming to see what the deal was, he realized, but the ones who saw the key just stopped dead and stared.

He got to his feet and backed slowly up the wide bank steps, holding the key out in front of him like a lion-tamer with a chair. When he got to the wide concrete plaza at the top, he stuffed it back into his pants pockets, turned, and fled.

He stopped just once on the far side of the plaza, and looked back. The small group of people around the place where he had been standing was coming slowly back to life. They looked around at each other with dazed expressions, then walked on. The cop glanced vacantly to his left, to his right, and then straight up at the sky, as if trying to remember how he had gotten here and what he had been meaning to do. Jake had seen enough. It was time to find a subway station and get his ass over to Brooklyn before anything else weird could happen.

13

AT QUARTER OF TWO that afternoon he walked slowly up the steps of the subway station and stood on the corner of Castle and Brooklyn Avenues, looking at the sandstone towers of Co-Op City. He waited for that feeling of sureness and direction—that feeling that was like being able to remember forward in time—to overtake him. It didn't come. Nothing came. He was just a kid standing on a hot Brooklyn streetcorner with his short shadow lying at his feet like a tired pet. Well, I'm here . . . , now what do I do?

Jake discovered he didn't have the slightest idea.

14

ROLAND'S SMALL BAND OF travellers reached the crest of the long, gentle hill they had been climbing and stood looking southeast. For a long time none of them spoke. Susannah opened her mouth twice, then closed it again. For the first time in her life as a woman, she was completely speechless.

Before them, an almost endless plain dozed in the long golden light of a summer's afternoon. The grass was lush, emerald green, and very high. Groves of trees with long, slender trunks and wide, spreading tops dotted the plain.

Susannah had once seen similar trees, she thought, in a travelogue film about Australia.

The road they had been following swooped down the far side of the hill and then ran straight as a string into the southeast, a bright white lane cutting through the grass. To the west, some miles off, she could see a herd of large animals grazing peacefully. They looked like buffalo. To the east, the last of the forest made a curved peninsula into the grassland. This incursion was a dark, tangled shape that looked like a forearm with a cocked fist at the end.

That was the direction, she realized, in which all the creeks and streams they had encountered had been flowing. They were tributaries of the vast river that emerged from that jutting arm of forest and flowed, placid and dreaming under the summer sun, toward the eastern edge of the world. It was wide, that river—perhaps two miles from bank to bank.

And she could see the city.

It lay dead ahead, a misty collection of spires and towers rising above the far edge of the horizon. Those airy ramparts might have been a hundred miles away, or two hundred, or four hundred. The air of this world seemed to be totally clear, and that made judging distances a fool's game. All she knew for sure was that the sight of those dim towers filled her with silent wonder . . . and a drop, aching homesickness for New York. She thought, I believe I'd do most anything just to see the Manhat-tan skyline from the Triborough Bridge again.

Then she had to smile, because that wasn't the truth. The truth was that she wouldn't trade Roland's world for anything. Its silent mystery and empty spaces were intoxicating. And her lover was here. In New York—the New York of her own time, at least—they would have been objects of scorn and anger, the butt of every idiot's crude, cruel jokes: a black woman of twenty-six and her whitebread lover who was three years younger and who had a tendency to talk like dis and dat when he got excited. Her whitebread lover who had been carrying a heavy monkey on his back only eight months before. Here, there was no one to jeer or laugh. Here, no one was pointing a finger. Here, there were only Roland, Eddie, and herself, the world's last three gunslingers.

She took Eddie's hand and felt it close over hers, warm and reassuring.

Roland pointed. "That must be the Send River," he said in a low voice. "I never thought to see it in my life . . . wasn't even sure it was real, like the Guardians."

"It's so lovely," Susannah murmured. She was unable to take her eyes from the vast landscape before her, dreaming richly in the cradle of summer. She found her eyes tracing the shadows of the trees, which trailed across the plain for

what seemed miles as the sun sank toward the horizon. "It's the way our Great Plains must have looked before they were settled—even before the Indians came." She raised her free hand and pointed toward the place where the Great Road narrowed to a point. "There's your city," she said. "Isn't it?"

"Yes."

"It looks okay," Eddie said. "Is that possible, Roland? Could it still be pretty much intact. Did the old-timers build that well?"

"Anything is possible in these times," Roland said, but he sounded doubtful.

"You shouldn't get your hopes up, though, Eddie."

"Huh? No." But Eddie's hopes were up. That dimly sketched skyline had awakened homesickness in Susannah's heart; in Eddie's it kindled a sudden blaze of supposition. If the city was still there—and it clearly was—it might still be populated, and maybe not just by the subhuman things Roland had met under the mountains, either. The city-dwellers might be (Americans, Eddie's subconscious whispered) intelligent and helpful; they might, in fact, spell the difference between success and failure for the quest of the pilgrims ... or even between life and death. In Eddie's mind a vision (partly cribbed from movies like *The Last Starfighter* and *The Dark Crystal*) gleamed brightly: a council of gnarled but dignified City Elders who would serve them a whopping meal drawn from the unspoiled stores of the city (or perhaps from special gardens cradled within environmental bubbles) and who would, as he and Roland and Susannah ate themselves silly, explain exactly what lay ahead and what it all meant. Their parting gift to the wayfarers would be an AAA-approved Tour Guide map with the best route to the Dark Tower marked in red.

Eddie did not know the phrase *deus ex machina*, but he knew—had now grown up enough to know—that such wise and kindly folk lived mostly in comic books and B-movies. The idea was intoxicating, all the same: an enclave of civilization in this dangerous, mostly empty world; wise old elf-men who would tell them just what the fuck it was they were supposed to be doing. And the fabulous shapes of the city disclosed in that hazy skyline made the idea seem at least possible. Even if the city was totally deserted, the population wiped out by some long-ago plague or outbreak of chemical warfare, it might still serve them as a kind of giant toolbox—a huge Army-Navy Surplus Store where they could outfit themselves for the hard passages Eddie was sure must lie ahead. Besides, he was a city boy, born and bred, and the sight of all those tall towers just naturally got him up.

"All right!" he said, almost laughing out loud in his excitement. "Hey-ho, let's go! Bring on those wise fuckin elves!"

Susannah looked at him, puzzled but smiling. "What you ravin about, white boy?"

"Nothing. Never mind. I just want to get moving. What do you say, Roland? Want to—"

But something on Roland's face or just beneath it—some lost, dreaming thing—caused him to fall silent and put one arm around Susannah's shoulders, as if to protect her.

that filled him with disquiet and foreboding. He had seen such things before, and the last time he'd come across one, Jake had been with him. He remembered how they had finally come out of the desert, the trail of the man in black leading them through the foothills and toward the mountains. Hard going, it had been, but at least there had been water again. And grass.

One night he had awakened to find Jake gone. He had heard strangled, desperate cries coming from a willow-grove hard by a narrow trickle of stream. By the time he had fought his way through to the clearing at the center of the grove, the boy's cries had ceased. Roland had found him standing in a place exactly like the one which lay below and ahead. A place of stones; a place of sacrifice; a place where an Oracle lived . . . and spoke when it was forced to . . . and killed whenever it could.

"Roland?" Eddie asked. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Do you see that?" Roland pointed. "It's a speaking ring. The shapes you see are tall standing stones." He found himself staring at Eddie, whom he had first met in the frightening but wonderful air-carriage of that strange other world where the gunslingers wore blue uniforms and there was an endless supply of sugar, paper, and wonderful drugs like astin. Some strange expression—some foreknowledge—was dawning on Eddie's face. The bright hope which had lit his eyes as he surveyed the city whiffed out, leaving him with a look both gray and bleak. It was the expression of a man studying the gallows on which he will soon be hanged.

First Jake, and now Eddie, the gunslinger thought. The wheel which turns our lives is remorseless; always it comes around to the same place again.

"Oh shit," Eddie said. His voice was dry and scared. "I think that's the place where the kid is going to try and come through."

The gunslinger nodded. "Very likely. They're thin places, and they're also attractive places. I followed him to such a place once before. The Oracle that kept there came very close to killing him."

"How do you know this?" Susannah asked Eddie. "Was it a dream?"

He only shook his head. "I don't know. But the minute Roland pointed that goddamn place out . . ." He broke off and looked at the gunslinger. "We have to get there, just as fast as we can." Eddie sounded both frantic and fearful.

"Is it going to happen today?" Roland asked. "Tonight?"

Eddie shook his head again, and licked his lips. "I don't know that, either. Not for sure. Tonight? I don't think so. Time . . . it isn't the same over here as it is where the kid is. It goes slower in his where and when. Maybe tomorrow." He had been battling panic, but now it broke free. He turned and grabbed Roland's shirt with his cold, sweating fingers. "But I'm supposed to finish the key, and I haven't, and I'm supposed to do something else, and I don't have a clue about what it is. And if the kid dies, it'll be my fault!"

The gunslinger locked his own hands over Eddie's and pulled them away from his shirt. "Get control of yourself."

"Roland, don't you understand—"

"I understand that whining and puling won't solve your problem. I understand that you have forgotten the face of your father."

"Quit that bullshit! I don't care dick about my father!" Eddie shouted hysterically, and Roland hit him across the face. His hand made a sound like a breaking branch.

Eddie's head rocked back; his eyes widened with shock. He stared at the gunslinger, then slowly raised his hand to touch the reddening handprint on his cheek. "You bastard!" he whispered. His hand dropped to the butt of the revolver he still wore on his left hip. Susannah tried to put her own hands over it; Eddie pushed them away.

And now I must teach again, Roland thought, only this time I teach for my own life, I think, as well as for his.

Somewhere in the distance a crow hailed its harsh cry into the stillness, and Roland thought for a moment of his hawk, David. Now Eddie was his hawk . . . and like David, he would not scruple to tear out his eye if he gave so much as a single inch.

Or his throat.

"Will you shoot me? Is that how you'd have it end, Eddie?"

"Man, I'm so fucking tired of your jive," Eddie said. His eyes were blurred with tears and fury.

"You haven't finished the key, but not because you are afraid to finish. You're afraid of finding you can't finish. You're afraid to go down to where the stones stand, but not because you're afraid of what may come once you enter the circle. You're afraid of what may not come. You're not afraid of the great world, Eddie, but of the small one inside yourself. You haven't forgotten the face of your father. So do it. Shoot me if you dare. I'm tired of watching you blubber."

"Stop it!" Susannah screamed at him. "Can't you see he'll do it? Can't you see you're forcing him to do it?"

Roland cut his eyes toward her. "I'm forcing him to decide." He looked back at Eddie, and his deeply lined face was stem. "You have come from the shadow of the heroin and the shadow of your brother, my friend. Come from the shadow of yourself, if you dare. Come now. Come out or shoot me and have done with it." For a moment he thought Eddie was going to do just that, and it would all end right here, on this high ridge, beneath a cloudless summer sky with the spires of the city glimmering on the horizon like blue ghosts. Then Eddie's cheek began to twitch. The firm line of his lips softened and began to tremble. His hand fell from the sandalwood butt of Roland's gun. His chest hitched once ... twice . . . three times. His mouth opened and all his despair and terror came out in one groaning cry as he blundered toward the gunslinger.

"I'm afraid, you numb fuck! Don't you understand that? Roland, I'm afraid!"

His feet tangled together, He fell forward. Roland caught him and held him close, smelling the sweat and dirt on his skin, smelling his tears and terror.

The gunslinger embraced him for a moment, then turned him toward Susannah. Eddie dropped to his knees beside her chair, his head hanging wearily. She put a hand on the back of his neck, pressing his head against her thigh, and said bitterly to Roland, "Sometimes I hate you, big white man."

Roland placed the heels of his hands against his forehead and pressed hard.

"Sometimes I hate myself."

"Don't ever stop you, though, do it?"

Roland didn't reply. He looked at Eddie, who lay with his cheek pressed against Susannah's thigh and his eyes tightly shut. His face was a study in misery.

Roland fought away the dragging weariness that made him want to leave the rest of this charming discussion for another day. If Eddie was right, there was no other day. Jake was almost ready to make his move. Eddie had been chosen to

midwife the boy into this world. If he wasn't prepared to do that, Jake would die at the point of entry, as surely as an infant must strangle if the mother-root is tangled about its neck when the contractions begin, "Stand up, Eddie."

For a moment he thought Eddie would simply go on crouching there and hiding his face against the woman's leg. If so, everything was lost . . . and that was ka, too. Then, slowly, Eddie got to his feet. He stood there with everything—hands, shoulders, head, hair—hanging, not good, but he was up, and that was a start. "Look at me."

Susannah stirred uneasily, but this time she said nothing. Slowly, Eddie raised his head and brushed the hair out of his eyes with a trembling hand.

"This is for you. I was wrong to take it at all, no matter how deep my pain." Roland curled his hand around the rawhide strip and yanked, snapping it. He held the key out to Eddie. Eddie reached for it like a man in a dream, but Roland did not immediately open his hand. "Will you try to do what needs to be done?"

"Yes." His voice was almost inaudible.

"Do you have something to tell me?"

"I'm sorry I'm afraid." There was something terrible in Eddie's voice, something which hurt Roland's heart, and he supposed, he knew what it was: here was the last of Eddie's childhood, expiring painfully among the three of them. It could not be seen, but Roland could hear its weakening cries. He tried to make himself deaf to them.

Something else I've done in the name of the Tower. My score grows ever longer, and the day when it will all have to be totted up, like a long-time drunkard's bill in an alehouse, draws ever nearer. How will I ever pay?

"I don't want your apology, least of all for being afraid," he said.

"Without fear, what would we be? Mad dogs with foam on our muzzles and shit drying on our hocks."

"What do you want, then?" Eddie cried. "You've taken everything else — everything I have to give! No, not even that, because in the end, I gave it to you! So what else do you want from me?"

Roland held the key which was their half of Jake Chambers's salvation locked in his fist and said nothing. His eyes held Eddie's, and the sun shone on the green expanse of plain and the blue-gray reach of the Send River, and somewhere in the distance the crow hailed again across the golden leagues of this fading summer afternoon.

After a while, understanding began to dawn in Eddie Dean's eyes.

Roland nodded.

"I have forgotten the face . . ." Eddie paused. Dipped his head. Swallowed. Looked up at the gunslinger once more. The thing which had been dying among them had moved on now — Roland knew it. That thing was gone. Just like that. Here, on this sunny wind-swept ridge at the edge of everything, it had gone forever. "I have forgotten the face of my father, gunslinger . . . and I cry your pardon." Roland opened his hand and returned the small burden of the key to him who ka had decreed must carry it. "Speak not so, gunslinger," he said in the High Speech. "Your father sees you very well . . . loves you very well . . . and so do I."

Eddie closed his own hand over the key and turned away with his tears still



drying on his face. "Let's go," he said, and they began to move down the long hill toward the plain which stretched beyond.

16

JAKE WALKED SLOWLY ALONG Castle Avenue, past pizza shops and bars and bodegas where old women with suspicious faces poked the potatoes and squeezed the tomatoes. The straps of his pack had chafed the skin beneath his arms, and his feet hurt. He passed beneath a digital thermometer which announced it was eighty-five. It felt more like a hundred and five to Jake.

Up ahead, a police car turned onto the Avenue. Jake at once became extremely interested in a display of gardening supplies in the window of a hardware store. He watched the reflection of the blue-and-white pass in the window and didn't move until it was gone.

Hey, Jake, old buddy—where, exactly, are you going?

He hadn't the slightest idea. He felt positive that the boy he was looking for—the boy in the green bandanna and the yellow T-shirt that said NEVER A DULL MOMENT IN MID-WORLD—was somewhere close by, but so what? To Jake he was still nothing but a needle hiding in the haystack which was Brooklyn.

He passed an alley which had been decorated with a tangle of spray-painted graffiti. Mostly they were names—EL TIANTE 91, SPEEDY GONZALES, MOTORVAN MIKE—but a few mottos and words to the wise had been dropped in here and there, and Jake's eyes fixed on two of these.

A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE

had been written across the bricks in spray-paint which had weathered to the same dusky-pink shade of the rose which grew in the vacant lot where Tom and Gerry's Artistic Deli had once stood. Below it, in a blue so dark it was almost black, someone had spray-painted this oddity:

I CRY YOUR PARDON.

What does that mean? Jake wondered. He didn't know—something from the Bible, maybe—but it held like the eye of a snake is reputed to hold a bird. At last he walked on, slowly and thoughtfully. It was almost two-thirty, and his shadow was beginning to grow longer.

Just ahead, he saw an old man walking down the street, keeping to the shade as much as possible and leaning on a gnarled cane. Behind the thick glasses he wore, his brown eyes swam like oversized eggs.

"I cry your pardon, sir," Jake said without thinking or even really hearing himself.

The old man turned to look at him, blinking in surprise and fear. "Liff me alone, boy," he said. He raised his walking-stick and brandished it clumsily in Jake's direction.

"Would you know if there's a place called Markey Academy anyplace around here, sir?" This was utter desperation, but it was the only thing he could think to ask.

The old man slowly lowered his stick—it was the sir that had done it. He looked

at Jake with the slightly lunatic interest of the old and almost senile. "How come you not in school, boy?"

Jake smiled wearily. This one was getting very old. "Finals Week. I came down here to look up an old friend of mine who goes to Markey Academy, that's all. Sorry to have bothered you."

He stepped around the old man (hoping he wouldn't decide to whop him one across the ass with his cane just for good luck) and was almost down to the corner when the old man yelled: "Boy! Boyyyyy!"

Jake turned around.

"There is no Markey Akidimy down here," the old man said. "Twen-ty-two years I'm living here, so I should know. Markey Avenue, yes, but no Markey Akidimy."

Jake's stomach cramped with sudden excitement. He took a step back toward the old, man, who at once raised his cane into a defensive position again. Jake stopped at once, leaving a twenty-foot safety zone between them. "Where's Markey Avenue, sir? Can you tell me that?"

"Of gorse," the old man said. "Didn't I just say I'm livink here twenty-two years? Two blogs down. Turn left at the Majestic Theatre. But I'm tellink you now, there iss no Markey Akidimy."

"Thank you, sir! Thank you!"

Jake turned around and looked up Castle Avenue. Yes—he could see the unmistakable shape of a movie marquee jutting out over the sidewalk a couple of blocks up. He started to run toward it, then decided that might attract attention and slowed down to a fast walk.

The old man watched him go. "Sir!" he said to himself in a tone of mild amazement. "Sir, yet!"

He chuckled rustily and moved on.

17

ROLAND'S BAND STOPPED AT dusk. The gunslinger dug a shallow pit and lit a fire. They didn't need it for cooking purposes, but they needed it, nonetheless. Eddie needed it. If he was going to finish his carving, he would need light to work by.

The gunslinger looked around and saw Susannah, a dark silhouette against the fading aquamarine sky, but he didn't see Eddie.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"Down the road apiece. You leave him alone now, Roland—you've done enough."

Roland nodded, bent over the firepit, and struck at a piece of flint with a worn steel bar. Soon the kindling he had gathered was blazing. He added small sticks, one by one, and waited for Eddie to return.

18

HALF A MILE BACK the way they had come, Eddie sat cross-legged in the middle of the Great Road with his unfinished key in one hand, watching the sky. He glanced down the road, saw the spark of the fire, and knew exactly what Roland was doing . . . and why. Then he turned his gaze to the sky again. He had never felt so lonely or so afraid.

The sky was huge—he could not remember ever seeing so much uninterrupted space,

so much pure emptiness. It made him feel very small, and he supposed there was nothing at all wrong with that. In the scheme of things, he was very small. The boy was close now. He thought he knew where Jake was and what he was about to do, and it filled him with silent wonder. Susannah had come from 1963. Eddie had come from 1987. Between them . . . Jake. Trying to come over. Trying to be born.

I met him, Eddie thought. I must have met him, and I think I remember. . . sort of. It was just before Henry went into the Army, right? He was taking courses at Brooklyn Vocational Institute, and he was heav-ily into black—black jeans, black motorcycle boots with steel caps, black T-shirts with the sleeves rolled up. Henry's James Dean look. Smoking Area Chic. I used to think that, but I never said it out loud, because I didn't want him pissed at me.

He realized that what he had been waiting for had happened while he was thinking: Old Star had come out. In fifteen minutes, maybe less, it would be joined by a whole galaxy of alien jewelry, but for now it gleamed alone in the ungathered darkness.

Eddie slowly held up the key until Old Star gleamed within its wide central notch. And then he recited the old formula of his world, the one his mother had taught him as she knelt beside him at the bedroom window, both of them looking out at the evening star which rode the oncoming darkness above the rooftops and fire-escapes of Brooklyn: "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight; wish I may, wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight."

Old Star glowed in the notch of the key, a diamond caught in ash.

"Help me find some guts," Eddie said. "That's my wish. Help me find the guts to try and finish this damned thing."

He sat there a moment longer, then got to his feet and walked slowly back to camp. He sat down as close to the fire as he could get, took the gunslinger's knife without a word to either him or Susannah, and began to work. Tiny, curling slivers of wood rolled up from the s-shape at the end of the key. Eddie worked fast, turning the key this way and that, occasionally closing his eyes and letting his thumb slip along the mild curves. He tried not to think about what might happen if the shape were to go wrong—that would freeze him for sure. Roland and Susannah sat behind him, watching silently. At last Eddie put the knife aside. His face was running with sweat. "This kid of yours," he said.

"This Jake. He must be a gutty brat."

"He was brave under the mountains," Roland said. "He was afraid, but never gave an inch."

"I wish I could be that way."

Roland shrugged. "At Balazar's you fought well even though they had taken your clothes. It's very hard for a man to fight naked, but you did it."

Eddie tried to remember the shootout in the nightclub, but it was just a blur in his mind—smoke, noise, and light shining through one wall in confused, intersecting rays. He thought that wall had been torn apart by automatic-weapons fire, but couldn't remember for sure.

He held the key up so its notches were sharply outlined against the flames. He held it that way for a long time, looking mostly at the s-shape. It looked exactly as he remembered it from his dream and from the momentary vision he had seen in the fire . . . but it didn't feel exactly right. Almost, but not quite.

That's just Henry again. That's just all those years of never being quite good

enough. You did it, buddy—it's just that the Henry inside doesn't want to admit it.

He dropped the key onto the square of hide and folded the edges carefully around it. "I'm done. I don't know if it's right or not, but I guess it's as right as I can make it." He felt oddly empty now that he no longer had the key to work on—purposeless and directionless.

"Do you want something to eat, Eddie?" Susannah asked quietly.

There's your purpose, he thought. There's your direction. Sitting right over there, with her hands folded in her lap. All the purpose and direction you'll ever—

But now something else rose in his mind—it came all at once. Not a dream . . . not a vision ...

No, not either of those. It's a memory. It's happening again—you're remembering forward in time.

"I have to do something else first," he said, and got up.

On the far side of the fire, Roland had stacked some odd lots of scavenged wood. Eddie hunted through them and found a dry stick about two feet long and four inches or so through the middle. He took it, returning to his place by the fire, and picked up Roland's knife again. This time he worked faster because he was simply sharpening the stick, turning it into something that looked like a small tent-peg.

"Can we get moving before daybreak?" he asked the gunslinger. "I think we should get to that circle as soon as we can."

"Yes. Sooner, if we must. I don't want to move in the dark—a speaking ring is an unsafe place to be at night—but if we have to, we have to."

"From the look on your face, big boy, I doubt if those stone circles are very safe any time," Susannah said.

Eddie put the knife aside again. The dirt Roland had taken out of the shallow hole he'd made for the campfire was piled up by Eddie's right foot. Now he used the sharp end of the stick to carve a question-mark shape in the dirt. The shape was crisp and clear.

"Okay," he said, brushing it away. "All done."

"Have something to eat, then," Susannah said.

Eddie tried, but he wasn't very hungry. When he finally went to sleep, nestled against Susannah's warmth, his rest was dreamless but very thin. Until the gunslinger shook him awake at four in the morning, he heard the wind racing endlessly over the plain below them, and it seemed to him that he went with it, flying high into the night, away from these cares, while Old Star and Old Mother rode serenely above him, painting his cheeks with frost.

19

"IT'S TIME," ROLAND SAID.

Eddie sat up. Susannah sat up beside him, rubbing her palms over her face. As Eddie's head cleared, his mind was filled with urgency. "Yes. Let's go, and fast."

"He's getting close, isn't he?"

"Very close." Eddie got to his feet, grasped Susannah around the waist, and boosted her into her chair.

She was looking at him anxiously. "Do we still have enough time to get there?"

Eddie nodded. "Barely."

Three minutes later they were headed down the Great Road again. It glimmered ahead of them like a ghost. And an hour after that, as the first light of dawn began to touch the sky in the east, a rhythmic sound began far ahead of them.

The sound of drums, Roland thought.

Machinery, Eddie thought. Some huge piece of machinery.

It's a heart, Susannah thought. Some huge, diseased, beating heart . . . and it's in that city, where we have to go.

Two hours later, the sound stopped as suddenly as it had begun. White, featureless clouds had begun to fill the sky above them, first veiling the early sun, then blotting it out. The circle of standing stones lay less than five miles ahead now, gleaming in the shadowless light like the teeth of a fallen monster.

20

SPAGHETTI WEEK AT THE MAJESTIC!

the battered, dispirited marquee jutting over the corner of Brooklyn and Markey Avenues proclaimed.

2 SERGIO LEONE CLASSIX!

A FISTFUL OF \$\$ PLUS GOOD BAD & UGLY!

99 Cents ALL SHOWS

A gum-chewing cutie with rollers in her blonde hair sat in the box office listening to Led Zep on her transistor and reading one of the tabloids of which Mrs. Shaw was so fond. To her left, in the theater's remaining display case, there was a poster showing Clint Eastwood.

Jake knew he should get moving—three o'clock was almost here—but he paused a moment anyway, staring at the poster behind the dirty, cracked glass. Eastwood was wearing a Mexican serape. A cigar was clamped in his teeth. He had thrown one side of the serape back over his shoulder to free his gun. His eyes were a pale, faded blue. Bombar-dier's eyes.

It's not him, Jake thought, but it's almost him. It's the eyes, mostly . . . the eyes are almost the same.

"You let me drop," he said to the man in the old poster, the man who was not Roland. "You let me die. What happens this time?"

"Hey, kid," the blonde ticket-seller called, making Jake start. "You gonna come in or just stand there and talk to yourself?"

"Not me," Jake said. "I've already seen those two."

He got moving again, turning left on Markey Avenue.

Once again he waited for the feeling of remembering forward to seize him, but it didn't come. This was just a hot, sunny street lined with sandstone-colored apartment buildings that looked like prison cellblocks to Jake. A few young women were walking along, pushing baby-carriages in pairs and talking desultorily, but the street was otherwise deserted. It was unseasonably hot for May—too hot to stroll.

What am I looking for? What?

From behind him came a burst of raucous male laughter. It was followed by an outraged female shriek: "You give that back\

Jake jumped, thinking the owner of the voice must mean him.

"Give it back, Henry! I'm not kidding!"

Jake turned and saw two boys, one at least eighteen and the other a lot younger . . . twelve or thirteen. At the sight of this second boy, Jake's heart did something that felt like a loop-the-loop in his chest. The lad was wearing green corduroys instead of madras shorts, but the yellow T-shirt was the same, and he had a battered old basketball under one arm. Although his back was to Jake, Jake knew he had found the boy from last night's dream.

21

THE GIRL WAS THE gum-chewing cutie from the ticket-booth. The older of the two boys—who looked almost old enough to be called a man— had her newspaper in his hands. She grabbed for it. The newspaper-grabber—he was wearing denims and a black T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up—held it over his head and grinned.

"Jump for it, Maryanne! Jump, girl, jump!"

She stared at him with angry eyes, her cheeks flushed. "Give it to me!" she said. "Quit fooling around and give it back! Bastard!"

"Oooo wisten to dat, Eddie!" the old kid said. "Bad wang-gwidge! Naughty, naughty!" He waved the newspaper just out of the blonde tick-et-seller's grasp, grinning, and Jake suddenly understood. These two were walking home from school together—although they probably didn't go to the same one, if he was right about the difference in their ages—and the bigger boy had gone over to the box office, pretending he had something interesting to tell the blonde. Then he had reached through the slot at the bottom and snatched her paper.

The big boy's face was one that Jake had seen before; it was the face of a kid who would think it the height of hilarity to douse a cat's tail with lighter fluid or feed a bread-ball with a fishhook planted in the middle to a hungry dog. The sort of lad who sat in the back of the room and snapped bra-straps and then said "Who me?" with a big, dumb look of surprise on his face when someone finally complained. There weren't many lads like him at Piper, but there were a few. Jake supposed there were a few in every school. They dressed better at Piper, but the face was the same. He guessed that in the old days, people would have said it was the face of a boy who was born to be hung.

Maryanne jumped for her newspaper, which the old boy in the black pants had rolled into a tube. He pulled it out of her reach just before she could grab it, then whacked her on the head with it, the way you might whack a dog for piddling on the carpet. She was beginning to cry now—mostly from humiliation, Jake guessed. Her face was now so red it was almost glowing. "Keep it, then!" she yelled at him. "I know you can't read, but you can look at the pictures, at least!"

She began to turn away.

"Give it back, why don't you?" the younger boy—Jake's boy—said softly.

The old boy held out the newspaper tube. The girl snatched it from him, and even from his place thirty feet farther down the street, Jake heard it rip. "You're a turd, Henry Dean!" she cried. "A real turd!"

"Hey, what's the big deal?" Henry sounded genuinely injured. "It was just a joke. Besides, it only ripped in one place—you can still read it, for Chrissake. Lighten up a little, why don'tcha?"

And that was right, too, Jake thought. Guys like this Henry always pushed even the most unfunny joke two steps too far ... then looked wounded and misunderstood when someone yelled at them. And it was always Wassa matter? and it was Can'tcha take a joke? and it was Why don'tcha lighten up a little?

What are you doing with him, kid? Jake wondered. If you're on my side, what are you doing with a jerk like that?

But as the younger lad turned around and they started to walk down the street again, Jake knew. The old boy's features were heavier, and his complexion was badly pitted with acne, but otherwise the resemblance was striking. The two boys were brothers.

22

JAKE TURNED AWAY AND began to idle up the sidewalk ahead of the two boys. He reached into his breast pocket with a shaky hand, pulled out his father's sunglasses, and managed to fumble them onto his face.

Voices swelled behind him, as if someone was gradually turning up the volume on a radio.

"You shouldn't have ranked on her that bad, Henry. It was mean."

"She loves it, Eddie." Henry's voice was complacent, worldly-wise. "When you get a little older, you'll understand."

"She was cryin."

"Prob'ly got the rag on," Henry said in a philosophical tone.

They were very close now. Jake shrank against the side of the building. His head was down, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his jeans. He didn't know why it seemed so vitally important that he not be noticed, but it did.

Henry didn't matter, one way or the other, but—

The younger one, isn't supposed to remember me, he thought. I don't know why, exactly, but he's not.

They passed him without so much as a glance, the one Henry had called Eddie walking on the outside, dribbling the basketball along the gutter.

"You gotta admit she looked funny," Henry was saying. "Ole Be-Bop Maryanne, jumpin for her newspaper. Woof! Woof!"

Eddie looked up at his brother with an expression that wanted to be reproachful . . . and then he gave up and dissolved into laughter. Jake saw the unconditional love in that upturned face and guessed that Eddie would forgive a lot in his big brother before giving it up as a bad job.

"So are we going?" Eddie asked now. "You said we could. After school."

"I said maybe. I dunno if I wanna walk all the way over there. Mom'll be home, by now, too. Maybe we just oughtta forget it. Go upstairs and watch some tube."

They were now ten feet ahead of Jake and pulling away.

"Ah, come on! You said!"

Beyond the building the two boys were currently passing was a chainlink fence with an open gate in it. Beyond it, Jake saw, was the playground of which he had dreamed last night ... a version of it, any-way. It wasn't surrounded by trees, and there was no odd subway kiosk with diagonal slashes of yellow and black across the front, but the cracked concrete was the same. So were the faded yellow foul lines.

"Well . . . maybe. I dunno." Jake realized Henry was teasing again. Eddie didn't, though; he was too anxious about wherever it was he wanted to go. "Let's shoot some hoops while I think it over."

He stole the ball from his younger brother, dribbled clumsily onto the playground, and went for a lay-up that hit high on the backboard and bounced back without even touching the rim of the hoop. Henry was good at stealing newspapers from teenage girls, Jake thought, but on the basketball court he sucked the big one.

Eddie walked in through the gate, unbuttoned his corduroy pants, and slipped them down. Beneath them were the faded madras shorts he had been wearing in Jake's dream.

"Oh, is he wearing his shortie panties?" Henry said. "Ain't they cuuute?" He waited until his brother balanced himself on one leg to pull off his cords, then flung the basketball at him. Eddie managed to bat it away, probably saving himself a bloody nose, but he lost his balance and fell clumsily to the concrete. He didn't cut himself, but he could have done so, Jake saw; a great deal of broken glass glittered in the sun along the chainlink.

"Come on, Henry, quit it," he said, but with no real reproach. Jake guessed I Henry had been pulling shit like this on him so long that Eddie only noticed it when Henry pulled it on someone else—someone like the blonde ticket-seller. "Turn on, Henwy, twit it."

Eddie got to his feet and trotted out onto the court. The ball had struck the chainlink fence and bounced back to Henry. Henry now tried to dribble past his younger brother. Eddie's hand went out, lightning-quick but oddly delicate, and stole the ball. He easily ducked under Henry's outstretched, flailing arm and went for the basket. Henry dogged him, frowning thunderously, but he might as well have been taking a nap. Eddie went up, knees bent, feet neatly cocked, and laid the ball in. Henry grabbed it and dribbled out to the stripe.

Shouldn't have done that, Eddie, Jake thought. He was standing just beyond the place where the fence ended, watching the two boys. This seemed safe enough, at least for the moment. He was wearing his dad's sunglasses, and the two boys were so involved in what they were doing that they wouldn't have noticed if President Carter had strolled up to watch. Jake doubted if Henry knew who President Carter was, anyway.

He expected Henry to foul his brother, perhaps heavily, as a payback for the steal, but he had underestimated Eddie's guile. Henry offered a head-fake that wouldn't have fooled Jake's mother, but Eddie appeared to fall for it. Henry broke past him and drove for the basket, gaily travel-ling the ball most of the way. Jake was quite sure Eddie could have caught him easily and stolen the ball again, but instead of doing so, the lad hung back. Henry laid it up—clumsily—and the ball bounced off the rim again. Eddie grabbed it ... and then let it squirt through his fingers. Henry snatched it, turned, and put it through the netless hoop.



"One-up," Henry panted. "Play to twelve?"

"Sure."

Jake had seen enough. It would be close, but in the end Henry would win. Eddie would see to it. It would do more than save him from getting lumped up; it would put Henry in a good mood, making him more agreeable to whatever it was Eddie wanted to do.

Hey Moose—I think your little brother has been playing you like a violin for a long time now, and you don't have the slightest idea, do you?

He drew back until the apartment building which stood at the north end of the court cut off his view of the Dean brothers, and their view of him. He leaned against the wall and listened to the thump of the ball on the court. Soon Henry was puffing like Charlie the Choo-Choo going up a steep hill. He would be a smoker, of course; guys like Henry were always smokers.

The game took almost ten minutes, and by the time Henry claimed victory, the street was filled up with other home-going kids. A few gave Jake curious glances as they passed by.

"Good game, Henry," Eddie said.

"Not bad," Henry panted. "You're still falling for the old head-fake."

Sure he is, Jake thought. I think he'll go on falling for it until he's gained about eighty pounds. Then you might get a surprise.

"I guess I am. Hey, Henry, can't we please go look at the place?"

"Yeah, why not? Let's do it."

"All right" Eddie yelled. There was the smacking sound of flesh on flesh; probably Eddie giving his brother a high-five. "Boss!"

"You go on up to the apartment. Tell Mom we'll be in by four-thirty, quarter of five. But don't say anything about The Mansion. She'd have a shit-fit. She thinks it's haunted, too."

"You want me to tell her we're going over Dewey's?"

Silence as Henry considered this. "Naw. She might call Mrs. Bunkowski. Tell her . . . tell her we're goin down to Dahlie's to get Hoodsie Rockets. She'll believe that. Ask her for a coupla bucks, too."

"She won't give me any money. Not two days before payday."

"Bullshit. You can get it out of her. Go on, now."

"Okay." But Jake didn't hear Eddie moving. "Henry?"

"What?" Impatiently.

"Is The Mansion haunted, do you think?"

Jake sidled a little closer to the playground. He didn't want to be noticed, but he strongly felt that he needed to hear this.

"Naw. There ain't no real haunted houses—just in the fuckin movies."

"Oh." There was unmistakable relief in Eddie's voice.

"But if there ever was one," Henry resumed (perhaps he didn't want his little brother feeling too relieved, Jake thought), "it'd be The Mansion. I heard that a couple of years ago, two kids from Norwood Street went in there to bump uglies and the cops found em with their throats cut and all the blood drained out of their bodies. But there wasn't any blood on em or around em. Get it? The blood was all gone."

"You shittin me?" Eddie breathed.

"Nope. But that wasn't the worst thing."

"What was?"

"Their hair was dead white," Henry said. The voice that drifted to Jake was solemn. He had an idea that Henry wasn't teasing this time, that this time he believed every word he was saying. (He also doubted that Henry had brains enough to make such a story up.) "Both of em. And their eyes were wide open and staring, like they saw the most gross-awful thing in the world."

"Aw, gimme a break," Eddie said, but his voice was soft, awed.

"You still wanna go?"

"Sure. As long as we don't . . . you know, hafta get too close."

"Then go see Mom. And try to get a couple of bucks out of her. I need cigarettes. Take the fuckin ball up, too."

Jake drifted backward and stepped into the nearest apartment building entryway just as Eddie came out through the playground gate.

To his horror, the boy in the yellow T-shirt turned in Jake's direction. Holy crow! he thought, dismayed. What if this is his building?

It was. Jake just had time to turn around and began to scan the names beside the rank of buzzers before Eddie Dean brushed past him, so close that Jake could smell the sweat he had worked up on the basketball court. He half-sensed, half-saw the curious glance the boy tossed in his direction. Then Eddie was in the lobby and headed for the elevators with his school-pants bundled under one arm and the scuffed basketball under the other.

Jake's heart was thudding heavily in his chest. Shadowing people was a lot harder in real life than it was in the detective novels he sometimes read. He crossed the street and stood between two apartment buildings half a block up. From here he could see both the entrance to the Dean brothers' building and the playground. The playground was filling up now, mostly with little kids. Henry leaned against the chainlink, smoking a cigarette and trying to look full of teenage angst. Every now and then he would stick out a foot as one of the little kids bolted toward him at an all-out run, and before Eddie returned, he had succeeded in tripping three of them. The last of these went sprawling full-length, smacking his face on the concrete, and ran wailing up the street with a bloody forehead. Henry flicked his cigarette butt after him and laughed cheerfully.

Just an all-around fun guy, Jake thought.

After that, the little lads wised up and began giving him a wide berth. Henry strolled out of the playground and down the street to the apartment building Eddie had entered five minutes before. As he reached it, the door opened and Eddie came out. He had changed into a pair of jeans and a fresh T-shirt; he had also tied a green bandanna, the same one he had been wearing in Jake's dream, around his forehead. He was waving a couple of dollar bills triumphantly. Henry snatched them, then asked Eddie something. Eddie nodded, and the two boys set off.

Keeping half a block between himself and them, Jake followed.

23

THEY STOOD IN THE high grass at the edge of the Great Road, looking at the speaking ring.

Stonehenge, Susannah thought, and shuddered. That's what it looks like.

Stonehenge.

Although the thick grass which covered the plain grew around the bases of the tall gray monoliths, the circle they enclosed was bare earth, littered here and there with white things.

"What are those?" she asked in a low voice. "Chips of stone?"

"Look again," Roland said.

She did, and saw that they were bones. The bones of small animals, maybe. She hoped.

Eddie switched the sharpened stick to his left hand, dried the palm of his right against his shirt, and then switched it back again. He opened his mouth, but no sound came from his dry throat. He cleared it and tried again. "I think I'm supposed to go in and draw something in the dirt."

Roland nodded. "Now?"

"Soon." He looked into Roland's face. "There's something here, isn't there? Something we can't see."

"It's not here right now," Roland said. "At least, I don't think it is. But it will come. Our khef—our life-force—will draw it. And, of course, it will be jealous of its place. Give me my gun back, Eddie."

Eddie unbuckled the belt and handed it over. Then he turned back to the circle of twenty-foot-high stones. Something lived in there, all right. He could smell it, a stench that made him think of damp plaster and moldering sofas and ancient mattresses rotting beneath half-liquid coats of mildew. It was familiar, that smell.

The Mansion—I smelled it there. The day I talked Henry into taking me over to see The Mansion on Rhinehold Street, in Dutch Hill.

Roland buckled his gunbelt, then bent to knot the tiedown. He looked up at Susannah as he did it. "We may need Detta Walker," he said. "Is she around?"

"That bitch always around." Susannah wrinkled her nose.

"Good. One of us is going to have to protect Eddie while he does what he's supposed to do. The other is going to be so much useless baggage. This is a demon's place. Demons are not human, but they are male and female, just the same. Sex is both their weapon and their weakness. No matter what the sex of the demon may be, it will go for Eddie. To protect its place. To keep its place from being used by an outsider. Do you understand?"

Susannah nodded. Eddie appeared not to be listening. He had tucked the square of hide containing the key into his shirt and now he was staring into the speaking ring as if hypnotized.

"There's no time to say this in a gentle or refined way," Roland told her. "One of us will—"

"One of us gonna have to fuck it to keep it off Eddie," Susannah interrupted.

"This the sort of thing can't ever turn down a free fuck. That's what you're gettin at, isn't it?"

Roland nodded.

Her eyes gleamed. They were the eyes of Detta Walker now, both wise and unkind, shining with hard amusement, and her voice slid steadily deeper into the bogus Southern plantation drawl which was Delta's trade-mark. "If it's a girl demon, you git it. But if it's a boy demon, it's mine. That about it?"

Roland nodded.

"What about if it swings both ways? What about that, big boy?"

Roland's lips twitched in the barest suggestion of a smile. "Then we'll take it

together. Just remember—"

Beside them, in a fainting, distant voice, Eddie murmured: "Not all is silent in the halls of the dead. Behold, the sleeper wakes." He turned his haunted, terrified eyes on Roland. "There's a monster."

"The demon—"

"No. A monster. Something between the doors—between the worlds. Something that waits. And it's opening its eyes."

Susannah cast a frightened glance at Roland.

"Stand, Eddie," Roland said. "Be true."

Eddie drew a deep breath. "I'll stand until it knocks me down," he said. "I have to go in now. It's starting to happen."

"We all goin in," Susannah said. She arched her back and slipped out of her wheelchair. "Any demon want to fuck wit' me he goan find out he's fuckin wit' the finest. I th'ow him a fuck he ain't never goan fgit."

As they passed between two of the tall stones and into the speaking circle, it began to rain.

24

As SOON AS JAKE saw the place, he understood two things: first, that he had seen it before, in dreams so terrible his conscious mind would not let him remember them; second, that it was a place of death and murder and madness. He was standing on the far corner of Rhinehold Street and Brooklyn Avenue, seventy yards from Henry and Eddie Dean, but even from where he was he could feel The Mansion ignoring them and reaching for him with its eager invisible hands, lie thought there were talons at the ends of those hands. Sharp ones.

It wants me, and I can't run away. It's death to go in ... but it's madness not to. Because somewhere inside that place is a locked door. I have the key that will open it, and the only salvation I can hope for is on the other side.

He stared at The Mansion, a house that almost screamed abnormal-ity, with a sinking heart. It stood in the center of its weedy, rioting yard like a tumor.

The Dean brothers had walked across nine blocks of Brooklyn, mov-ing slowly under the hot afternoon sun, and had finally entered a section of town which had to be Dutch Hill, given the names on the shops and stores. Now they stood halfway down the block, in front of The Mansion. It looked as if it had been deserted for years, yet it had suffered remark-ably little vandalism. And once, Jake thought, it really had been a man-sion—the home, perhaps, of a wealthy merchant and his large family. In those long-gone days it must have been white, but now it was a dirty gray no-color. The windows had been knocked out and the peeling picket fence which surrounded it had been spray-painted, but the house itself was still intact.

It slumped in the hot light, a ramshackle slate-roofed revenant grow-ing out of a hummocky trash-littered yard, somehow making Jake think of a dangerous dog which pretended to be asleep. Its steep roof overhung the front porch like a beetling brow. The boards of the porch were splintery and warped. Shutters which might once have been green leaned askew beside the glassless windows; ancient curtains still hung in some of these, dangling like strips of dead skin. To the left, an elderly trellis leaned away from die building, now held up not by nails but only by die nameless and somehow filthy clusters of vine which crawled over

it. There was a sign on the lawn and another on die door. From where Jake stood, he could read neither of them.

The house was alive. He knew this, could feel its awareness reaching out from the boards and the slumping roof, could feel it pouring in rivers from the black sockets of its windows. The idea of approaching that terrible place filled him with dismay; the idea of actually going inside filled him with inarticulate horror. Yet he would have to. He could hear a low, slumbrous buzzing in his ears—the sound of a beehive on a hot summer day—and for a moment he was afraid he might faint. He closed his eyes . . . and his voice filled his head.

You must come, Jake. This is the path of the Beam, the way of the Tower, and the time of your Drawing. Be true; stand; come to me.

The fear didn't pass, but that terrible sense of impending panic did. He opened his eyes again and saw that he was not the only one who had sensed the power and awakening sentience of the place. Eddie was trying to pull away from the fence. He turned toward Jake, who could see Eddie's eyes, wide and uneasy beneath his green head-band. His big brother grabbed him and pushed him toward the rusty gate, but the gesture was too half-hearted to be much of a tease; however thick-headed he might be, Henry liked The Mansion no better than Eddie did.

They drew away a little and stood looking at the place for a while. Jake could not make out what they were saying to each other, but the tone of their voices was awed and uneasy. Jake suddenly remembered Eddie speaking in his dream: Remember there's danger, though. Be care-ful . . . and be quick.

Suddenly the real Eddie, the one across the street, raised his voice enough so that Jake could make out the words. "Can we go home now, Henry? Please? I don't like it." His tone was pleading.

"Fuckin little sissy," Henry said, but Jake thought he heard relief as well as indulgence in Henry's voice. "Come on."

They turned away from the ruined house crouching high-shouldered behind its sagging fence and approached the street. Jake backed up, then turned and looked into the window of the dispirited little hole-in-the-wall shop called Dutch Hill Used Appliances. He watched Henry and Eddie, dim and ghostly reflections superimposed on an ancient Hoover vacuum cleaner, cross Rhinehold Street.

"Are you sure it's not really haunted?" Eddie asked as they stepped onto the sidewalk on Jake's side.

"Well, I tell you what," Henry said. "Now that I been out here again, I'm really not so sure."

They passed directly behind Jake without looking at him. "Would you go in there?" Eddie asked.

"Not for a million dollars," Henry replied promptly.

They rounded the corner. Jake stepped away from the window and peeped after them. They were headed back the way they had come, close together on the sidewalk, Henry hulking along in his steel-toed shit-kickers, his shoulders already slumped like those of a much older man, Eddie walking beside him with neat, unconscious grace. Their shadows, long and trailing out into the street now, mingled amicably together.

They're going home, Jake thought, and felt a wave of loneliness so strong that he felt it would crush him. Going to eat supper and do homework and argue over which TV shows to watch and then go to bed. Henry may be a bullying shit, but they've got a life, those two, one that makes sense . . . and they're going back

to it. I wonder if they have any idea of how lucky they are. Eddie might, I suppose.

Jake turned, adjusted the straps of his pack, and crossed Rhinehold Street.

25

SUSANNAH SENSED MOVEMENT IN the empty grassland beyond the circle of standing stones: a sighing, whispering rush.

"Something comin," she said tautly. "Comin fast."

"Be careful," Eddie said, "but keep it off me. You understand? Keep it off me."

"I hear you, Eddie. You just do your own thing."

Eddie nodded. He knelt in the center of the ring, holding the sharp-ened stick out in front of him as if assessing its point. Then he lowered it and drew a dark straight line in the dirt. "Roland, watch out for her. . ."

"I will if I can, Eddie."

". . . but keep it off me. Jake's coming. Crazy little mother's really coming."

Susannah could now see the grasses due north of the speaking ring parting in a long dark line, creating a furrow that lanced straight at the circle of stones.

"Get ready," Roland said. "It'll go for Eddie. One of us will have to ambush it."

Susannah reared up on her haunches like a snake coming out of a Hindu fakir's basket. Her hands, rolled into hard brown fists, were held at the sides of her face. Her eyes blazed. "I'm ready," she said and then shouted: "Come on, big boy! You come on right now! Run like it's yo birfday!"

The rain began to fall harder as the demon which lived here re-entered its circle in a booming rush. Susannah had just time to sense thick and merciless masculinity—it came to her as an eyewatering smell of gin and juniper—and then it shot toward the center of the circle. She closed her eyes and reached for it, not with her arms or her mind but with all the female force which lived at the core of her: Hey, big boy! Where you goan? D'pussy be ovah heah! It whirled. She felt its surprise . . . and then its raw hunger, as full and urgent as a pulsing artery. It leaped upon her like a rapist springing from the mouth of an alley.

Susannah howled and rocked backward, cords standing out on her neck. The dress she wore first flattened against her breasts and belly, and then began to tear itself to shreds. She could hear a pointless, directionless panting, as if the air itself had decided to rut with her.

"Suze!" Eddie shouted, and began to get to his feet.

"No!" she screamed back. "Do it! I got this sumbitch right where . . . right where I want him! Go on, Eddie! Bring the kid! Bring—" Coldness battered at the tender flesh between her legs. She grunted, fell backward . . . then supported herself with one hand and thrust defiantly forward and upward. "Bring him through!"

Eddie looked uncertainly at Roland, who nodded. Eddie glanced at Susannah again, his eyes full of dark pain and darker fear, and then deliberately turned his back on both of them and fell to his knees again. He reached forward with the sharpened stick which had become a make-shift pencil, ignoring the cold rain falling on his arms and the back of his neck. The stick began to move, making lines and angles, creating a shape Roland knew at once.

It was a door.

26

JAKE REACHED OUT, PUT his hands on the splintery gate, and pushed. It swung slowly open on screaming, rust-clotted hinges. Ahead of him was an uneven brick path. Beyond the path was the porch. Beyond the porch was the door. It had been boarded shut.

He walked slowly toward the house, heart telegraphing fast dots and dashes in his throat. Weeds had grown up between the buckled bricks. He could hear them rustling against his bluejeans. All his senses seemed to have been turned up two notches. You're not really going in there, are you? a panic-stricken voice in his head asked.

And the answer that occurred to him seemed both totally nuts and perfectly reasonable: All things serve the Beam.

The sign on the lawn read

**ABSOLUTELY NO TRESPASSING UNDER PENALTY OF LAW!**

The yellowing, rust-stained square of paper nailed to one of the boards crisscrossing the front door was more succinct:

**BY ORDER OF NYC HOUSING AUTHORITY THIS PROPERTY CONDEMNED**

Jake paused at the foot of the steps, looking up at the door. He had heard voices in the vacant lot and now he could hear them again . . . but this was a choir of the damned, a babble of insane threats and equally insane promises. Yet he thought it was all one voice. The voice of the house; the voice of some monstrous doorkeeper, roused from its long unpeaceful sleep.

He thought briefly of his father's Ruger, even considered pulling it out of his pack, but what good would it do? Behind him, traffic passed back and forth on Rhinehold Street and a woman was yelling for her daughter to stop holding hands with that boy and bring in the wash, but here was another world, one ruled by some bleak being over whom guns could have no power.

Be true, Jake—stand.

"Okay," he said in a low, shaky voice. "Okay, I'll try. But you better not drop me again."

Slowly, he began to mount the porch steps.

27

THE BOARDS WHICH BARRED the door were old and rotten, the nails rusty. Jake grabbed hold of the top set at the point where they crossed each other and yanked. They came free with a squall that was the gate all over again. He tossed them over the porch rail and into an ancient flowerbed where only witchgrass and dogweed grew. He bent, grasped the lower crossing . . . and paused for a moment. A hollow sound came through the door; the sound of some animal slobbering hungrily from deep inside a concrete pipe. Jake felt a sick sheen of sweat begin to break out on his cheeks and forehead. He was so frightened that he no longer

felt precisely real; he seemed to have become a character in someone else's bad dream.

The evil choir, the evil presence, was behind this door. The sound of it seeped out like syrup.

He yanked at the lower boards. They came free easily.

Of course. It wants me to come in. It's hungry, and I'm supposed to be the main course.

A snatch of poetry occurred to him suddenly, something Ms. Avery had read to them. It was supposed to be about the plight of modern man, who was cut off from all his roots and traditions, but to Jake it suddenly seemed that the man who had written that poem must have seen this house: / will show you something different from either/Your shadow in the morning striding behind you/Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;/I will show you . . .

"I'll show you fear in a handful of dust," Jake muttered, and put his hand on the doorknob. And as he did, that clear sense of relief and surety flooded him again, the feeling that this was it, this time the door would open on that other world, he would see a sky untouched by smog and industrial smoke, and, on the far horizon, not the mountains but the hazy blue spires of some gorgeous unknown city.

He closed his fingers around the silver key in his pocket, hoping the door was locked so he could use it. It wasn't. The hinges screamed and flakes of rust sifted down from their slowly revolving cylinders as the door opened. The smell of decay struck Jake like a physical blow: wet wood, spongy plaster, rotting laths, ancient stuffing. Below these smells was another—the smell of some beast's lair. Ahead was a dank, shadowy hallway. To the left, a staircase pitched and yawed its crazy way into the upper shadows. Its collapsed banister lay splintered on the hallway floor, but Jake was not foolish enough to think it was just splinters he was looking at. There were bones in that litter, as well—the bones of small animals. Some did not look precisely like animal bones, and these Jake would not look at overlong; he knew he would never summon the courage to go further if he did. He paused on the threshold, screwing himself up to take the first step. He heard a faint, muffled sound, very hard and very rapid, and realized it was his own teeth chattering in his head.

Why doesn't someone stop me? he thought wildly. Why doesn't some-body passing on the sidewalk shout "Hey, you! You're not supposed to be in there—can'tcha read?"

But he knew why. Pedestrians stuck mostly to the other side of this street, and those who came near this house did not linger.

Even if someone did happen to look, they wouldn't see me, because I'm not really here. For better or worse, I've already left my world behind. I've started to cross over. His world is somewhere ahead. This ...

This was the hell between.

Jake stepped into the corridor, and although he screamed when the door swung shut behind him with the sound of a mausoleum door being slammed, he wasn't surprised.

Down deep, he wasn't surprised at all.



frequent the honky-tonks and roadhouses along Ridgeline Road outside of Nutley and on Route 88 down by the power-lines, out-side of Amhigh. She had had legs in those days, and, as the song says, she knew how to use them. She would wear some tight cheap dress that looked like silk but wasn't and dance with the white boys while the band played all those ofay party tunes like "Double Shot of My Baby's Love" and "The Hippy-Hippy Shake." Eventually she would cut one of the honkeys out of the pack and let him lead her back to his car in the parking lot. There she would make out with him (one of the world's great soul-kissers was Detta Walker, and no slouch with the old fingernails, either) until he was just about insane . . . and then she'd shut him down. What happened next? Well, that was the question, wasn't it? That was the game. Some of them wept and begged—^all right, but not great. Some of them raved and roared, which was better.

And although she had been slapped upside the head, punched in the eye, spat upon, and once kicked in the ass so hard she had gone sprawling in the gravel parking lot of The Red Windmill, she had never been raped. They had all gone home with the blue balls, every damned ofay one of them. Which meant, in Detta Walker's book, that she was the reigning champion, the undefeated queen. Of what? Of them. Of all those crewcut, button-down, tightass honkey motherfuckers. Until now.

There was no way to withstand the demon who lived in the speaking ring. No doorhandles to grab, no car to tumble out of, no building to run back into, no cheek to slap, no face to claw, no balls to kick if the ofay sumbitch was slow getting the message.

The demon was on her . . . and then, in a flash, it—he—was in her.

She could feel it—him—pressing her backward, even though she could not see it—him. She could not see its—his—hands, but she could see their work as her dress tore violently open in several places. Then, suddenly, pain. It felt as though she were being ripped open down there, and in her agony and surprise she screamed. Eddie looked around, his eyes narrowing.

"I'm all right!" she yelled. "Go on, Eddie, forget about me! I'm all right!"

But she wasn't. For the first time since Detta had strode onto the sexual battlefield at the age of thirteen, she was losing. A horrid, engorged coldness plunged into her; it was like being fucked with an icicle.

Dimly, she saw Eddie turn away and begin drawing in the dirt again, his expression of warm concern fading back into the terrible, concen-trated coldness she sometimes felt in him and saw on his face. Well, that was all right, wasn't it? She had told him to go on, to forget her, to do what he needed to do in order to bring the boy over. This was her part of Jake's drawing and she had no right to hate either of the men, who had not twisted her arm—or anything else—to make her do it, but as the coldness froze her and Eddie turned away from her, she hated them both; could, in fact, have torn their honkey balls off.

Then Roland was with her, his strong hands were on her shoulders and although he didn't speak, she heard him: Don't fight. You can't win if you fight—you can only die. Sex is its weapon, Susannah, but it's also its weakness.

Yes. It was always their weakness. The only difference was that this time she was going to have to give a little more—but maybe that was all right. Maybe in the end, she would be able to make this invisible honkey demon pay a little more.

She forced herself to relax her thighs. Immediately they spread apart, pushing

long, curved fans in the dirt. She threw her head back into the rain which was now pelting down and sensed its face lolling just over hers, eager eyes drinking in every contorted grimace which passed over her face.

She reached up with one hand, as if to slap . . . and instead, slid it around the nape of her demon rapist's neck. It was like cupping a palmful of solid smoke. And did she feel it twitch backward, surprised at her caress? She tilted her pelvis upward, using her grip on the invisible neck to create the leverage. At the same time she spread her legs even wider, splitting what remained of her dress up the side-seams. God, it was huge!

"Come on," she panted. "You ain't gonna rape me. You ain't. You want t'fuck me? I fuck you. I give you a fuckin like you ain't nevah had! Fuck you to death!"

She felt the engorgement within her tremble; felt the demon try, at least momentarily, to draw back and regroup.

"Unh-unh, honey," she croaked. She squeezed her thighs inward, pinning it. "De fun jus' startin'." She began to flex her butt, humping at the invisible presence. She reached up with her free hand, interlaced all ten fingers, and allowed herself to fall backward with her hips cocked, her straining arms seeming to hold nothing. She tossed her sweat-damp hair out of her eyes; her lips split in a sharklike grin.

Let me go! a voice cried out in her mind. But at the same time she could feel the owner of the voice responding in spite of itself.

"No way, sugar. You wanted it ... now you goan get it." She thrust upward, holding on, concentrating fiercely on the freezing cold inside her. "I'm goan melt that icicle, sugar, and when it's gone, what you goan do then?" Her lips rose and fell, rose and fell. She squeezed her thighs mercilessly together, closed her eyes, clawed more deeply into the unseen neck, and prayed that Eddie would be quick.

She didn't know how long she could do this.

29

THE PROBLEM, JAKE THOUGHT, was simple: somewhere in this dank, terrible place was a locked door. The right door. All he had to do was find it. But it was hard, because he could feel the presence in the house gathering. The sound of those dissonant, gabbling voices was beginning to merge into one sound—a low, grating whisper.

And it was approaching.

A door stood open to the right. Beside it, thumbtacked to the wall, was a faded daguerreotype which showed a hanged man dangling like a piece of rotten fruit from a dead tree. Beyond it was a room that had once been a kitchen. The stove was gone, but an ancient icebox—the land with the circular refrigeration drum on top—stood on the far side of the hilly, faded linoleum. Its door gaped open.

Black, smelly stuff was caked inside and had trickled down to form a long-congealed puddle on the floor. The kitchen cabinets stood open. In one he saw what was probably the world's oldest can of Snow's Clam Fry-Ettes. Poking out of another was the head of a dead rat. Its eyes were white and seemingly in motion, and after a moment Jake realized that the empty sockets were filled with squirming maggots.

Something fell into his hair with a flabby thump. Jake screamed in surprise,

reached for it, and grasped something that felt like a soft, bristle-covered rubber ball. He pulled it free and saw it was a spider, its bloated body the color of a fresh bruise. Its eyes regarded him with stupid malevolence. Jake threw it against the wall. It broke open and splattered there, legs twitching feebly.

Another one dropped onto his neck. Jake felt a sudden painful bite just below the place where his hair stopped. He ran backward into the hall, tripped over the fallen banister, fell heavily, and felt the spider pop. Its innards—wet, feverish, and slippery—slid between his shoulder-blades like warm egg-yoke. Now he could see other spiders in the kitchen doorway. Some hung on almost invisible silken threads like obscene plumb-bobs; others simply dropped on the floor in a series of muddy plops and scuttered eagerly over to greet him.

Jake flailed to his feet, still screaming. He felt something in his mind, something that felt like a frayed rope, starting to give way. He supposed it was his sanity, and at that realization, Jake's considerable courage finally broke. He could bear this no longer, no matter what the stake. He bolted, meaning to flee if he still could, and realized too late that he had turned the wrong way and was running deeper into The Mansion instead of back toward the porch. He lunged into a space too big to be a parlor or living room; it seemed to be a ballroom. Elves with strange, sly smiles on their faces capered on the wallpaper, peering at Jake from beneath peaked green caps. A mouldy couch was pushed against one wall. In the center of the warped wooden floor was a splintered chandelier, its rusty chain lying in snarls among the spilled glass beads and dusty teardrop pendants. Jake skirted the wreck, snatching one terrified glance back over his shoulder. He saw no spiders; if not for the nastiness still trickling down his back, he might have believed he had imagined them.

He looked forward again and came to a sudden, skidding halt. Ahead, a pair of French doors stood half-open on their recessed tracks. Another hallway stretched beyond. At the end of this second corridor stood a closed door with a golden knob. Written across the door—or perhaps carved into it—were two words:

## THE BOY

Below the doorknob was a filigreed silver plate and a keyhole.

I found it! Jake thought fiercely. I finally found it! That's it! That's the door!

From behind him a low groaning noise began, as if the house was beginning to tear itself apart. Jake turned and looked back across the ballroom. The wall on the far side of the room had begun to swell outward, pushing the ancient couch ahead of it. The old wallpaper shuddered; the elves began to ripple and dance. In places the paper simply snapped upward in long curls, like windowshades which have been released too suddenly. The plaster bulged forward in a pregnant curve. From beneath it, Jake could hear dry snapping sounds as the lathing broke, rearranging itself into some new, as-yet-hidden shape. And still the sound increased. Only it was no longer precisely a groan; now it sounded like a snarl. He stared, hypnotized, unable to pull his eyes away.

The plaster didn't crack and then vomit outward in chunks; it seemed to have become plastic, and as the wall continued to bulge, making an irregular white

bubble-shape from which scraps and draggles of wallpaper still hung, the surface began to mold itself into hills and curves and valleys. Suddenly Jake realized he was looking at a huge plastic face that was pushing itself out of the wall.

It was like looking at someone who has walked headfirst into a wet sheet.

There was a loud snap as a chunk of broken lath tore free of the rippling wall.

It became the jagged pupil of one eye. Below it, the wall writhed into a snarling mouth filled with jagged teeth. Jake could see fragments of wallpaper clinging to its lips and gums.

One plaster hand tore free of the wall, trailing an unravelling brace-let of rotted electrical wire. It grasped the sofa and threw it aside, leaving ghostly white fingermarks on its dark surface. More lathing burst free as the plaster fingers flexed. They created sharp, splintery claws. Now the face was all the way out of the wall and staring at Jake with its one wooden eye. Above it, in the center of its forehead, one wallpaper elf still danced. It looked like a weird tattoo. There was a wrenching sound as the thing began to slide forward. The hall doorway tore out and became a hunched shoulder. The thing's one free hand clawed across the floor, spraying glass droplets from the fallen chandelier.

Jake's paralysis broke. He turned, lunged through the French doors, and pelted down the second length of hallway with his pack bouncing and his right hand groping for the key in his pocket. His heart was a runaway factory machine in his chest. Behind him, the thing which was crawling out of The Mansion's woodwork bellowed at him, and although there were no words, Jake knew what it was saying; it was telling him to stand still, telling him that it was useless to run, telling him there was no escape. The whole house now seemed alive; the air resounded with splintering wood and squalling beams. The humming, insane voice of the doorkeeper was everywhere.

Jake's hand closed on the key. As he brought it out, one of the notches caught in the pocket. His fingers, wet with sweat, slipped. The key fell to the floor, bounced, dropped through a crack between two warped boards, and disappeared.

30

"HE'S IN TROUBLE!" SUSANNAH heard Eddie shout, but the sound of his voice was distant. She had plenty of trouble herself . . . but she thought she might be doing okay, just the same.

I'm goan melt that icicle, sugar, she had told the demon. I'm goan melt it, and when it's gone, what you goan do then?

She hadn't melted it, exactly, but she had changed it. The thing inside her was certainly giving her no pleasure, but at least the terrible pain had subsided and it was no longer cold. It was trapped, unable to disengage. Nor was she holding it in with her body, exactly. Roland had said sex was its weakness as well as its weapon, and he had been right, as usual. It had taken her, but she had also taken it, and now it was as if each of them had a finger stuck in one of those fiendish Chinese tubes, where yanking only sticks you tighter.

She hung onto one idea for dear life; had to, because all other conscious thought had vanished. She had to hold this sobbing, frightened, vicious thing in the snare of its own helpless lust. It wriggled and thrust and convulsed within her, screaming to be let go at the same time it used her body with greedy,

helpless intensity, but she would not let it go free.  
And what's gonna happen when I finally do let go? she wondered desperately.  
What's it gonna do to pay me back?  
She didn't know.

31

THE RAIN WAS FALLING in sheets, threatening to turn the circle within the stones into a sea of mud. "Hold something over the door!" Eddie shouted. "Don't let the rain wash it out!"

Roland snatched a glance at Susannah and saw she was still struggling with the demon. Her eyes were half-shut, her mouth pulled down in a harsh grimace. He could not see or hear the demon, but he could sense its angry, frightened thrashings.

Eddie turned his streaming face toward him. "Did you hear me?" he shouted. "Get something over the goddam door, and do it NOW!"

Roland yanked one of their hides from his pack and held a corner in each hand. Then he stretched his arms out and leaned over Eddie, creating a makeshift tent. The tip of Eddie's homemade pencil was caked with mud. He wiped it across his arm, leaving a smear the color of bitter chocolate, then wrapped his fist around the stick again and bent over his drawing. It was not exactly the same size as the door on Jake's side of the barrier—the ratio was perhaps .75:1—but it would be big enough for Jake to come through . . . if the keys worked.

If he even has a key, isn't that what you mean? he asked himself. Suppose he's dropped it . . . or that house made him drop it?

He drew a plate under the circle which represented the doorknob, hesitated, and then squiggled the familiar shape of a keyhole within it:

He hesitated. There was one more thing, but what? It was hard to think of, because it felt as if there were a tornado roaring through his head, a tornado with random thoughts flipping around inside it instead of uprooted barns and privies and chicken-houses.

"Come on, sugah!" Susannah cried from behind him. "You weakenin on me! Wassa matta? I thought you was some kind of hot-shit studboy!"

Boy. That was it.

Carefully, he wrote THE BOY across the top panel of the door with the tip of his stick. At the instant he finished the Y, the drawing changed. The circle of rain-darkened earth he had drawn suddenly darkened even more . . . and pushed up from the ground, becoming a dark, gleaming knob. And instead of brown, wet earth within the shape of the keyhole, he could see dim light.

Behind him, Susannah shrieked at the demon again, urging it on, but now she sounded as if she were tiring. This had to end, and soon.

Eddie bent forward from the waist like a Muslim saluting Allah, and put his eye to the keyhole he had drawn. He looked through it into his own world, into that house which he and Henry had gone to see in May of 1977, unaware (except he, Eddie, had not been unaware; no, not totally unaware, even then) that a boy from another part of the city was following them.

He saw a hallway. Jake was down on his hands and knees, tugging frantically at a board. Something was coming for him. Eddie could see it, but at the same time he

could not—it was as if part of his brain refused to see it, as if seeing would lead to comprehension and comprehension to madness.

"Hurry up, Jake!" he screamed into the keyhole. "For Christ's sake, move it!" Above the speaking ring, thunder ripped the sky like cannon-fire and the rain turned to hail.

32

FOR A MOMENT AFTER the key fell, Jake only stood where he was, staring down at the narrow crack between the boards.

Incredibly, he felt sleepy.

That shouldn't have happened, he thought. It's one thing too much. I can't go on with this, not one minute, not one single second longer. I'm going to curl up against that door instead. I'm going to go to sleep, right away, all at once, and when it grabs me and pulls me toward its mouth, I'll never wake up.

Then the thing coming out of the wall grunted, and when Jake looked up, his urge to give in vanished in a single stroke of terror. Now it was all the way out of the wall, a giant plaster head with one broken wooden eye and one reaching plaster hand. Chunks of lathing stood out on its skull in random hackles, like a child's drawing of hair. It saw Jake and opened its mouth, revealing jagged wooden teeth. It grunted again. Plaster-dust drifted out of its yawning mouth like cigar smoke.

Jake fell to his knees and peered into the crack. The key was a small brave shimmer of silvery light down there in the dark, but the crack was far too narrow to admit his fingers. He seized one of the boards and yanked with all his might. The nails which held it groaned ... but held.

There was a jangling crash. He looked down the hallway and saw the hand, which was bigger than his whole body, seize the fallen chandelier and throw it aside.

The rusty chain which had once held it suspended rose like a bullwhip and then came down with a heavy crump. A dead lamp on a rusty chain rattled above Jake, dirty glass chattering against ancient brass.

The doorkeeper's head, attached only to its single hunched shoulder and reaching arm, slid forward above the floor. Behind it, the remains of the wall collapsed in a cloud of dust. A moment later the fragments humped up and became the creature's twisted, bony back.

The doorkeeper saw Jake looking and seemed to grin. As it did, splinters of wood poked out of its wrinkling cheeks. It dragged itself forward through the dust-hazed ballroom, mouth opening and closing. Its great hand groped amid the ruins, feeling for purchase, and ripped one of the French doors at the end of the hall from its track.

Jake screamed breathlessly and began to wrench at the board again. It wouldn't come, but the gunslinger's voice did:

"The other one, Jake! Try the other one!"

He let go of the board he had been yanking at and grabbed the one on the other side of the crack. As he did, another voice spoke. He heard this one not in his head but with his ears, and understood it was coming from the other side of the door—the door he had been looking for ever since the day he hadn't been run over in the street.

"Hurry up, Jake! For Christ's sake, hurry up!"

When he yanked this other board, it came free so easily that he almost tumbled over backward.

33

Two WOMEN WERE STANDING in the doorway of the used appliance shop across the street from The Mansion. The older was the proprietor; the younger had been her only customer when the sounds of crashing walls and breaking beams began. Now, without knowing they were doing it, they linked arms about each other's waists and stood that way, trembling like children who hear a noise in the dark.

Up the street, a trio of boys on their way to the Dutch Hill Little League field stood gaping at the house, their Red Ball Flyer wagon filled with baseball equipment forgotten behind them. A delivery driver nosed his van into the curb and got out to look. The patrons of Henry's Corner Market and the Dutch Hill Pub came straggling up the street, looking around wildly.

Now the ground began to tremble, and a fan of fine cracks started to spread across Rhinehold Street.

"Is it an earthquake?" the delivery van driver shouted at the women standing outside the appliance shop, but instead of waiting for an answer he jumped back behind the wheel of his van and drove away rapidly, swerving to the wrong side of the street to keep away from the ruined house which was the epicenter of this convulsion.

The entire house seemed to be bowing inward. Boards splintered, jumped off its face, and rained down into the yard. Dirty gray-black waterfalls of slate shingles poured down from the eaves. There was an earsplitting bang and a long, zigzagging crack shot down the center of The Mansion. The door disappeared into it and then the whole house began to swallow itself from the outside in.

The younger woman suddenly broke the older one's grip. "I'm get-ting out of here," she said, and began to run up the street without looking back.

34

A HOT, STRANGE WIND began to sigh down the hallway, blowing Jake's sweaty hair back from his brow as his fingers closed over the silver key. He now understood on some instinctive level what this place was, and what was happening. The doorkeeper was not just in the house, it was the house: every board, every shingle, every windowsill, every eave. And now it was pushing forward, becoming some crazily jumbled representation of its true shape as it did. It meant to catch him before he could use the key. Beyond the giant white head and the crooked, hulking shoulder, he could see boards and shingles and wire and bits of glass—even the front door and the broken banister—flying up the main hall and into the ballroom, joining the form which bulked there, creating more and more of the misshapen plaster-man that was even now groping toward him with its freakish hand.

Jake yanked his own hand out of the hole in the floor and saw it was covered with huge trundling beetles. He slapped it against the wall to knock them off, and cried out as the wall first opened and then tried to close around his wrist. He yanked his hand free just in time, whirled, and jammed the silver key into the hole in the plate.

The plaster-man roared again, but its voice was momentarily drowned out by a harmonic shout which Jake recognized: he had heard it in the vacant lot, but it had been quiet then, perhaps dreaming. Now it was an unequivocal cry of triumph. That sense of certainty—over-whelming, inarguable—filled him again, and this time he felt sure there would be no disappointment. He heard all the affirmation he needed in that voice. It was the voice of the rose.

The dim light in the hallway was blotted out as the plaster hand tore away the other French door and squeezed into the corridor. The face socked itself into the opening above the hand, peering at Jake. The plaster fingers crawled toward him like the legs of a huge spider.

Jake turned the key and felt a sudden surge of power rush up his arm. He heard a heavy, muffled thump as the locked bolt inside with-drew. He seized the knob, turned it, and yanked the door open. It swung wide. Jake cried out in confused horror as he saw what lay behind.

The doorway was blocked with earth, from top to bottom and side to side. Roots poked out like bunches of wire. Worms, seeming as confused as Jake was himself, crawled hither and thither on the door-shaped pack of dirt. Some dived back into it; others only went on crawling about, as if wondering where the earth which had been below them a moment ago had gone. One dropped onto Jake's sneaker. The keyhole shape remained for a moment, shedding a spot of misty white light on Jake's shirt. Beyond it—so close, so out of reach—he could hear rain and a muffled boom of thunder across an open sky. Then the keyhole shape was also blotted out, and gigantic plaster fingers curled around Jake's lower leg.

35

EDDIE DID NOT FEEL the sting of the hail as Roland dropped the hide, got to his feet, and ran to where Susannah lay.

The gunslinger grabbed her beneath the arms and dragged her—as gently and carefully as he could—across to where Eddie crouched. "Let it go when I tell you, Susannah!" Roland shouted. "Do you understand? When I tell you!" Eddie saw and heard none of this. He heard only Jake, screaming faintly on the other side of the door.

The time had come to use the key.

He pulled it out of his shirt and slid it into the keyhole he had drawn. He tried to turn it. The key would not turn. Not so much as a millimeter. Eddie lifted his face to the pelting hail, oblivious to the iceballs which struck his forehead and cheeks and lips, leaving welts and red blotches.

"NO!" he howled. "OH GOD, PLEASE! NO!"

But there was no answer from God; only another crash of thunder and a streak of lightning across a sky now filled with racing clouds.

36

JAKE LUNGED UPWARD, CRABBED the chain of the lamp which hung above him, and ripped free of the doorkeeper's clutching fingers. He swung backward, used the packed earth in the doorway to push off, and then swung forward again like Tarzan on a vine. He raised his legs and kicked out at the clutching fingers as he closed on them. Plaster exploded in chunks, revealing a crudely jointed



skeleton of lathing beneath. The plaster-man roared, a sound of intermingled hunger and rage. Beneath that cry, Jake could hear the whole house collapsing, like the one in that story of Edgar Allan Poe.

He pendulumed back on the chain, struck the wall of packed earth which blocked the doorway, then swung forward again. The hand reached up for him and he kicked at it wildly, legs scissoring. He felt a stab of pain in his foot as those wooden fingers clutched. When he swung back again, he was minus a sneaker. He tried for a higher grip on the chain, found it, and began to shinny up toward the ceiling. There was a muffled, creaking thud above him. Fine plaster dust had begun to sift down on his upturned, sweating face. The ceiling had begun to sag; the lamp-chain was pulling out of it a link at a time. There was a thick crunching sound from the end of the hallway as the plaster-man finally pushed its hungry face through the opening.

Jake swung helplessly back toward that face, screaming.

37

EDDIE'S TERROR AND PANIC suddenly fell away. The cloak of coldness dropped over him—a cloak Roland of Gilead had worn many times. It was the only armor the true gunslinger possessed . . . and all such a one needed. At the same moment, a voice spoke in his mind. He had been haunted by such voices over the last three months; his mother's voice, Roland's voice, and, of course, Henry's. But this one, he recognized with relief, was his own, and it was at last calm and rational and courageous.

You saw the shape of the key in the fire, you saw it again in the wood, and both times you saw it perfectly. Later on, you put a blindfold of fear over your eyes. Take it off. Take it off and look again. It may not be too late, even now. He was faintly aware that the gunslinger was staring at him grimly; faintly aware that Susannah was shrieking at the demon in a fading but still defiant voice; faintly aware that, on the other side of the door, Jake was screaming in terror—or was it now agony?

Eddie ignored them all. He pulled the wooden key out of the key-hole he had drawn, out of the door which was now real, and looked at it fixedly, trying to recapture the innocent delight he had sometimes known as a child—the delight of seeing a coherent shape hidden in senselessness. And there it was, the place he'd gone wrong, so clearly visible he couldn't understand how he'd missed it in the first place. I really must have been wearing a blindfold, he thought. It was the s-shape at the end of the key, of course. The second curve was a bit too fat. Just a tiny bit.

"Knife," he said, and held out his hand like a surgeon in an operating room.

Roland slapped it into his palm without a word.

Eddie gripped the top of the blade between the thumb and first finger of his right hand. He bent over the key, unmindful of the hail which pelted his unprotected neck, and the shape in the wood stood out more clearly—stood out with its own lovely and undeniable reality.

He scraped.

Once.

Delicately.

A single sliver of ash, so thin it was almost transparent, curled up from the

belly of the s-shape at the end of the key.

On the other side of the door, Jake Chambers shrieked again.

38

THE CHAIN LET GO with a rattling crash and Jake fell heavily, landing on his knees. The doorkeeper roared in triumph. The plaster hand seized Jake about his hips and began to drag him down the hall. He stuck his legs out in front of him and planted his feet, but it did no good. He felt splinters and rust-blunted nails digging into his skin as the hand tightened its grip and continued to drag him forward.

The face appeared to be stuck just inside the entrance to the hallway like a cork in a bottle. The pressure it had exerted to get in that far had squeezed the rudimentary features into a new shape, that of some mon-strous, malformed troll. The mouth yawned open to receive him. Jake groped madly for the key, wanting to use it as some last-ditch talisman, but of course he had left it in the door.

"You son of a bitch!" he screamed, and threw himself backward with all his strength, bowing his back like an Olympic diver, unmindful of the broken boards which dug into him like a belt of nails. He felt his jeans slide down on his hips, and the grip of the hand slipped momentarily.

Jake lunged again. The hand clenched brutally, but Jake's jeans slid down to his knees and his back slammed to the floor, with the pack to cushion the blow. The hand loosened, perhaps wanting to secure a firmer grip upon its prey. Jake was able to draw his knees up a little, and when the hand tightened again, Jake drove his legs forward. The hand yanked backward at the same time, and what Jake had hoped for happened: his jeans (and his remaining sneaker) were peeled from his body, leaving him free again, at least for the moment. He saw the hand rotate on his wrist of boards and disintegrating plaster and jam his dungarees into his mouth. Then he was crawling back toward the blocked doorway on his hands and knees, oblivious of the glass fragments from the fallen lamp, wanting only to get his key again.

He had almost reached the door when the hand closed over his naked legs and began to pull him back once more.

39

THE SHAPE WAS THERE now, finally all there.

Eddie put the key back into the keyhole and applied pressure. For a moment there was resistance . . . and then it revolved beneath his hand. He heard the locking mechanism turn, heard the bar pull back, felt the key crack in two the moment it had served its purpose. He grasped the dark, polished knob with both hands and pulled. There was a sense of great weight wheeling on an unseen pivot. A feeling that his arm had been gifted with boundless strength. And a clear knowledge that two worlds had suddenly come in contact, and a way had been opened between them. He felt a moment of dizziness and disorientation, and as he looked through the doorway he realized why: although he was looking down—vertically—he was seeing horizontally. It was like a strange optical illusion created with prisms and mirrors. Then he saw Jake being pulled backward down the glass- and

plaster-littered hallway, elbows dragging, calves pinned-together by a giant hand. And he saw the monstrous mouth which awaited him, fuming some white fog that might have been either smoke or dust.

"Roland!" Eddie shouted. "Roland, it's got h—"

Then he was knocked aside.

40

SUSANNAH WAS AWARE OF being hauled up and whirled around. The world was a carousel blur: standing stones, gray sky, hailstone-littered ground... and a rectangular hole that looked like a trapdoor in the ground. Screams drifted up from it. Within her, the demon raved and struggled, wanting only to escape but helpless to do so until she allowed it.

"Now!" Roland was shouting. "Let it go now, Susannah! For your father's sake, let it go NOW!"

And she did.

She had (with Detta's help) constructed\* a trap for it in her mind, something like a net of woven rushes, and now she cut them. She felt the demon fly back from her at once, and there was an instant of terrible hollowness, terrible emptiness. These feelings were at once overshadowed by relief and a grim sense of nastiness and defilement.

As its invisible weight fell away, she glimpsed it—an inhuman shape like a manta-ray with huge, curling wings and something that looked like a cruel baling hook curving out and up from beneath. She saw/sensed the thing flash above the open hole in the ground. Saw Eddie looking up with wide eyes. Saw Roland spread his arms wide to catch the demon.

The gunslinger staggered back, almost knocked off his feet by the unseen weight of the demon. Then he rocked forward again with an armload of nothing.

Clutching it, he jumped through the doorway and was gone.

41

SUDDEN WHITE LIGHT FLOODED the hallway of The Mansion; hailstones struck the walls and bounced up from the broken boards of the floor. Jake heard confused shouts, then saw the gunslinger come through. He seemed to leap through, as if he had come from above. His arms were held far out in front of him, the tips of the fingers locked.

Jake felt his feet slide into the doorkeeper's mouth.

"Roland!" he shrieked. "Roland, help me!"

The gunslinger's hands parted and his arms were immediately thrown wide. He staggered backward. Jake felt serrated teeth touch his skin, ready to tear flesh and grind bone, and then something huge rushed over his head like a gust of wind. A moment later the teeth were gone. The hand which had pinned his legs together relaxed. He heard an unearthly shriek of pain and surprise begin to issue from the doorkeeper's dusty throat, and then it was muffled, crammed back. Roland grabbed Jake and hauled him to his feet.

"You came!" Jake shouted. "You really came!"

"I came, yes. By the grace of the gods and the courage of my friends, I came." As the doorkeeper roared again, Jake burst into tears of relief and terror. Now

the house sounded like a ship foundering in a heavy sea. Chunks of wood and plaster fell all around them. Roland swept Jake into his arms and ran for the door. The plaster hand, groping wildly, struck one of his booted feet and spun him into the wall, which again tried to bite. Roland pushed forward, turned, and drew his gun. He fired twice into the aimlessly thrashing hand, vaporizing one of the crude plaster fingers. Behind them, the face of the doorkeeper had gone from white to a dingy purplish-black, as if it were choking on something—something which had been fleeing so rapidly that it had entered the monster's mouth and jammed in its gullet before it realized what it was doing. Roland turned again and ran through the doorway. Although there was now no visible barrier, he was stopped cold for a moment, as if an unseen meshwork had been drawn across the chair.

Then he felt Eddie's hands in his hair and he was yanked not forward but upward.

42

THEY EMERGED INTO WET air and slackening hail like babies being born. Eddie was the midwife, as the gunslinger had told him he must be. He was sprawled forward on his chest and belly, his arms out of sight in the doorway, his hands clutching fistfuls of Roland's hair.

"Suze! Help me!"

She wriggled forward, reached through, and groped a hand under Roland's chin. He came up to her with his head cocked backward and his lips parted in a snarl of pain and effort.

Eddie felt a tearing sensation and one of his hands came free holding a thick lock of the gunslinger's gray-streaked hair. "He's slipping!"

"This motherfucker . . . ain't . . . nowhere!" Susannah gasped, and gave a terrific wrench, as if she meant to snap Roland's neck.

Two small hands shot out of the doorway in the center of the circle and clutched one of the edges. Freed of Jake's weight, Roland got an elbow up, and a moment later he was boosting himself out. As he did it, Eddie grabbed Jake's wrists and hauled him up.

Jake rolled onto his back and lay there, panting.

Eddie turned to Susannah, took her in his arms, and began to rain kisses on her forehead, cheeks, and neck. He was laughing and crying at the same time. She clung to him, breathing hard . . . but there was a small, satisfied smile on her lips and one hand slipped over Eddie's wet hair in slow, contented strokes.

From below them came a cauldron of black sounds: squeals, grunts, thuds, crashes.

Roland crawled away from the hole with his head down. His hair stood up in a wild wad. Threads of blood trickled down his cheeks. "Shut it!" he gasped at Eddie. "Shut it, for your father's sake!"

Eddie got the door moving, and those vast, unseen hinges did the rest. The door fell with a gigantic, toneless bang, cutting off all sound from below. As Eddie watched, the lines that had marked its edges faded back to smudged marks in the dirt. The doorknob lost its dimension and was once more only a circle he'd drawn with a stick. Where the keyhole had been there was only a crude shape with a chunk of wood sticking out of it, like the hilt of a sword from a stone.

Susannah went to Jake and pulled him gently to a sitting position. "You all right, sugar?"

He looked at her dazedly. "Yes, I think so. Where is he? The gunslinger? There's something I have to ask him."

"I'm here, Jake," Roland said. He got to his feet, drunk-walked over to Jake, and hunkered beside him. He touched the boy's smooth cheek almost unbelievably.

"You won't let me drop this time?"

"No," Roland said. "Not this time, not ever again." But in the deep-est darkness of his heart, he thought of the Tower and wondered.

43

THE HAIL CHANGED TO a hard, driving rain, but Eddie could see gleams of blue sky behind the unravelling clouds in the north. The storm was going to end soon, but in the meantime, they were going to get drenched.

He found he didn't mind. He could not remember when he had felt so calm, so at peace with himself, so utterly drained. This mad adventure wasn't over yet—he suspected, in fact, that it had barely begun— but today they had won a big one.

"Su/e?" He pushed her hair away from her face and looked into her dark eyes.

"Are you okay? Did it hurt you?"

"Hurt me a little, but I'm okay. I think that bitch Detta Walker is still the undefeated Roadhouse Champeen, demon or no demon."

"What's that mean?"

She grinned impishly. "Not much, not anymore . . . thank God. How about you, Eddie? All right?"

Eddie listened for Henry's voice and didn't hear it. He had an idea that Henry's voice might be gone for good. "Even better than that," he said, and, laughing, folded her into his arms again. Over her shoulder he could see what was left of the door: only a few faint lines and angles. Soon the rain would wash those away, too.

44

"WHAT'S YOUR NAME?" JAKE asked the woman whose legs stopped just above the knee.

He was suddenly aware that he had lost his pants in his struggle to escape the doorkeeper, and he pulled the tail of his shirt down over his underwear. There wasn't very much left of her dress, either, as far as that went.

"Susannah Dean," she said. "I already know your name."

"Susannah," Jake said thoughtfully. "I don't suppose your father owns a railroad company, does he?"

She looked astonished for a moment, then threw her head back and laughed. "Why, no, sugar! He was a dentist who went and invented a few things and got rich. What makes you ask a thing like that?"

Jake didn't answer. He had turned his attention to Eddie. The terror had already left his face, and his eyes had regained that cool, assessing look which Roland remembered so well from the way station.

"Hi, Jake," Eddie said. "Good to see you, man."

"Hi," Jake said. "I met you earlier today, but you were a lot younger then."

"I was a lot younger ten minutes ago. Are you okay?"

"Yes," Jake said. "Some scratches, that's all." He looked around. "You haven't found the train yet." This was not a question. Eddie and Susannah exchanged puzzled looks, but Roland only shook his head. "No train."

"Are your voices gone?"

Roland nodded. "All gone. Yours?"

"Gone. I'm all together again. We both are."

They looked at the same instant, with the same impulse. As Roland swept Jake into his arms, the boy's unnatural self-possession broke and he began to cry—it was the exhausted, relieved weeping of a child who has been lost long, suffered much, and is finally safe again. As Roland's arms closed about his waist, Jake's own arms slipped about the gunslinger's neck and gripped like hoops of steel.

"I'll never leave you again," Roland said, and now his own tears came. "I swear to you on the names of all my fathers: I'll never leave you again."

Yet his heart, that silent, watchful, lifelong prisoner of ka, received the words of this promise not just with wonder but with doubt.

BOOK TWO

LUD

A HEAP OF BROKEN IMAGES

## IV-TOWN AND KA-TET

### IV TOWN AND KA-TET

1

FOUR DAYS AFTER EDDIE had yanked him through the doorway between worlds, minus his original pair of pants and his sneakers but still in possession of his pack and his life, Jake awoke with something warm and wet nuzzling at his face. If he had come around to such a sensation on any of the three previous mornings, he undoubtedly would have wakened his companions with his screams, for he had been feverish and his sleep had been haunted by nightmares of the plaster-man. In these dreams his pants did not slide free, the doorkeeper kept its grip, and it tucked him into its unspeakable mouth, where its teeth came down like the bars guarding a castle keep. Jake awoke from these dreams shuddering and moaning helplessly.

The fever had been caused by the spider-bite on the back of his neck. When Roland examined it on the second day and found it worse instead of better, he had conferred briefly with Eddie and had then given Jake a pink pill. "You'll want to take four of these every day for at least a week," he said.

Jake had gazed at it doubtfully. "What is it?"

"Cheflet," Roland said, then looked disgustedly at Eddie. "You tell him. I still can't say it."

"Keflex. You can trust it, Jake; it came from a government-approved pharmacy in good old New York. Roland swallowed a bunch of it, and he's as healthy as a horse. Looks a little like one, too, as you can see."

Jake was astonished. "How did you get medicine in New York?"

"That's a long story," the gunslinger said. "You'll hear all of it in time, but for now just take the pill."

Jake did. The response was both quick and satisfying. The angry red swelling around the bite began to fade in twenty-four hours, and now the fever was gone as well.

The warm thing nuzzled again and Jake sat up with a jerk, his eyes flying open. The creature which had been licking his cheek took two hasty steps backward. It was a billy-bumbler, but Jake didn't know that; he had never seen one before now. It was skinnier than the ones Roland's party had seen earlier, and its black- and gray-striped fur was matted and mangy. There was a clot of old dried blood on one flank. Its gold-ringed black eyes looked at Jake anxiously; its

hindquarters switched hopefully back and forth. Jake relaxed. He supposed there were exceptions to the rule, but he had an idea that something wagging its tail—or trying to—was probably not too dangerous.

It was just past first light, probably around five-thirty in the morning. Jake could peg it no closer than that because his digital Seiko no longer worked ... or rather, was working in an extremely eccentric way. When he had first glanced at it after coming through, the Seiko claimed it was 98:71:65, a time which did not, so far as Jake knew, exist. A longer look showed him that the watch was now running backward. If it had been doing this at a steady rate, he supposed it might still have been of some use, but it wasn't. It would unwind its numbers at what seemed like the right speed for awhile (Jake verified this by saying the word "Mississippi" between each number), and then the readout would either stop entirely for ten or twenty seconds—making him think the watch had finally given up the ghost—or a bunch of numbers would blur by all at once.

He had mentioned this odd behavior to Roland and had shown him the watch, thinking it would amaze him, but Roland examined it closely for only a moment or two before nodding in a dismissive way and telling Jake it was an interesting clock, but as a rule no timepiece did very good work these days. So the Seiko was useless, but Jake still found himself loath to throw it away . . . because, he supposed, it was a piece of his old life, and there were only a few of those left.

Right now the Seiko claimed it was sixty-two minutes past forty on a Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday in both December and March.

The morning was extremely foggy; beyond a radius of fifty or sixty feet, the world simply disappeared. If this day was like the previous three, the sun would show up as a faint white circle in another two hours or so, and by nine-thirty the day would be clear and hot. Jake looked around and saw his travelling companions (he didn't quite dare call them friends, at least not yet) asleep beneath their hide blankets—Roland close by, Eddie and Susannah a larger hump on the far side of the dead campfire.

He once more turned his attention to the animal which had awak-ened him. It looked like a combination raccoon and woodchuck, with a dash of dachshund thrown in for good measure.

"How you doin, boy?" he asked softly.

"Oy!" the billy-bumbler replied at once, still looking at him anx-iously. Its voice was low and deep, almost a bark; the voice of an English footballer with a bad cold in his throat.

Jake recoiled, surprised. The billy-bumbler, startled by the quick movement, took several further steps backward, seemed about to flee, and then held its ground. Its hindquarters wagged back and forth more strenuously than ever, and its gold-black eyes continued to regard Jake nervously. The whiskers on its snout trembled.

"This one remembers men," a voice remarked at Jake's shoulder. He looked around and saw Roland squatting just behind him with his forearms resting on his thighs and his long hands dangling between his knees. He was looking at the animal with a great deal more interest than he had shown in Jake's watch.

"What is it?" Jake asked softly. He did not want to startle it away; he was enchanted. "Its eyes are beautiful!"

"Billy-bumbler," Roland said.



"Umber!" the creature ejaculated, and retreated another step.

"It talks!"

"Not really. Bumpers just repeat what they hear—or used to. I haven't heard one do it in years. This fellow looks almost starved. Probably came to forage."

"He was licking my face. Can I feed it?"

"We'll never get rid of it if you do," Roland said, then smiled a little and snapped his fingers. "Hey! Billy!"

The creature mimicked the sound of the snapping fingers somehow; it sounded as if it were clucking its tongue against the roof of its mouth. "Ay!" it called in its hoarse voice. "Ay, Illy!" Now its ragged hindquarters were positively gagging back and forth.

"Go ahead and give it a bite. I knew an old groom once who said a good bumbler is good luck. This looks like a good one."

"Yes," Jake agreed. "It does."

"Once they were tame, and every barony had half a dozen roaming around the castle or manor-house. They weren't good for much except amusing the children and keeping the rat population down. They can be quite faithful—or were in the old days—although I never heard of one that would remain as loyal as a good dog. The wild ones are scavengers. Not dangerous, but a pain in the ass."

"Ass!" cried the bumbler. Its anxious eyes continued to flick back and forth between Jake and the gunslinger.

Jake reached into his pack, slowly, afraid to startle the creature, and drew out the remains of a gunslinger burrito. He tossed it toward the billy-bumbler. The bumbler flinched back and then turned with a small, childlike cry, exposing its furry corkscrew tail. Jake felt sure it would run, but it stopped, looking doubtfully back over its shoulder.

"Come on," Jake said. "Eat it, boy."

"Oy," the bumbler muttered, but it didn't move.

"Give it time," Roland said. "It'll come, I think."

The bumbler stretched forward, revealing a long and surprisingly graceful neck. Its slender black nose twitched as it sniffed the food. At last it trotted forward, and Jake noticed it was limping a little. The bumbler sniffed the burrito, then used one paw to separate the chunk of deermeat from the leaf. It carried out this operation with a delicacy that was oddly solemn. Once the meat was clear of the leaf, the bumbler wolfed it in a single bite, then looked up at Jake. "Oy!" it said, and when Jake laughed, it shrank away again.

"That's a skinny one," Eddie said sleepily from behind them. At the sound of his voice, the bumbler immediately turned and was gone into the mist.

"You scared it away!" Jake accused.

"Jeez, I'm sorry," Eddie said. He ran a hand through his sleep-corkscrewed hair.

"If I'd known it was one of your close personal friends, Jake, I would have dragged out the goddam coffee-cake."

Roland clapped Jake briefly on the shoulder. "It'll be back."

"Are you sure?"

"If something doesn't kill it, yes. We fed it, didn't we?"

Before Jake could reply, the sound of the drums began again. This was the third morning they had heard them, and twice the sound had come to them as afternoon slipped down toward evening: a faint, toneless thudding from the direction of the city. The sound was clearer this morning, if no more comprehensible. Jake

hated it. It was as if, somewhere out in that thick and featureless blanket of morning mist, the heart of some big animal was beating.

"You still don't have any idea what that is, Roland?" Susannah asked. She had slipped on her shift, tied back her hair, and was now folding the blankets beneath which she and Eddie had slept.

"No. But I'm sure vve'll find out."

"How reassuring," Eddie said sourly.

Roland got to his feet. "Come on. Let's not waste the day."

2

THE FOG BEGAN TO unravel after they had been on the road for an hour or so. They took turns pushing Susannah's chair, and it jolted unhappily along, for the road was now mined with large, rough cobblestones. By midmorning the day was fair, hot, and cloudless; the city skyline stood out clearly on the southeastern horizon. To Jake it didn't look much different from the skyline of New York, although he thought these build-ings might not be as high. If the place had fallen apart, as most things in Roland's world apparently had, you certainly couldn't tell it from here. Like Eddie, Jake had begun to entertain the unspoken hope that they might find help there ... or at least a good hot meal.

To their left, thirty or forty miles away, they could see the broad sweep of the Send River. Birds circled above it in large flocks. Every now and then one would fold its wings and drop like a stone, probably on a fishing expedition. The road and the river were moving slowly toward one another, although the junction point could not yet be seen.

They could see more buildings ahead. Most looked like farms, and all appeared deserted. Some of them had fallen down, but these wrecks seemed to be the work of time rather than violence, furthering Eddie's and Jake's hopes of what they might find in the city—hopes each had kept strictly within himself, lest the others scoff. Small herds of shaggy beasts grazed their way across the plains. They kept well away from the road except to cross, and this they did quickly, at a gallop, like packs of small children afraid of traffic. They looked like bison to Jake . . . except he saw several which had two heads. He mentioned this to the gunslinger and Roland nodded.

"Muties."

"Like under the mountains?" Jake heard the fear in his own voice and knew the gunslinger must, also, but he was helpless to keep it out. He remembered that endless nightmare journey on the handcart very well.

"I think that here the mutant strains are being bred out. The things we found under the mountains were still getting worse."

"What about up there?" Jake pointed toward the city. "Will there be mutants there, or—" He found it was as close as he could come to voicing his hope.

Roland shrugged. "I don't know, Jake. I'd tell you if I did."

They were passing an empty building—almost surely a farmhouse—that had been partially burnt. But that amid have been lighting, Jake thought, and wondered which it was he was trying to do—explain to himself or fool himself.

Roland, perhaps reading his mind, put an arm around Jake's shoul-ders. "No use even trying to guess, Jake," he said. "Whatever happened here happened long ago." He pointed. "That over there was probably a corral. Now it's just a few

sticks poking out of the grass."

"The world has moved on, right?"

Roland nodded.

"What about the people? Did they go to the city, do you think?"

"Some may have," Roland said. "Some are still around."

"What?" Susannah jerked around to look at him, startled.

Roland nodded. "We've been watched the last couple of days. There aren't a lot of folk denning in these old buildings, but there are some. There'll be more as we get closer to civilization." He paused. "Or what used to be civilization."

"How do you know they're there?" Jake asked.

"Smelled them. Seen a few gardens hidden behind banks of weeds grown purposely to hide the crops. And at least one working windmill way back in a grove of trees. Mostly, though, it's just a feeling . . . like shade on your face instead of sunshine. It'll come to you three in time, I imagine."

"Do you think they're dangerous?" Susannah asked. They were approaching a large, ramshackle building that might once have been a storage shed or an abandoned country market, and she eyed it uneasily, her hand dropping to the butt of the gun she wore on her chest.

"Will a strange dog bite?" the gunslinger countered.

"What's that mean?" Eddie asked. "I hate it when you start up with your Zen Buddhist shit, Roland."

"It means I don't know," Roland said. "Who is this man Zen Bud-dhist? Is he wise like me?"

Eddie looked at Roland for a long, long time before deciding the gunslinger was making one of his rare jokes. "Ah, get outta here," he said. He saw one corner of Roland's mouth twitch before he turned away. As Eddie started to push Susannah's chair again, something else caught his eye. "Hey, Jake!" he called. "I think you made a friend!"

Jake looked around, and a big grin overspread his face. Forty yards to the rear, the scrawny billy-bumbler was limping industriously after them, sniffing at the weeds which grew between the crumbling cobbles of the Great Road.

3

SOME HOURS LATER ROLAND called a halt and told them to be ready.

"For what?" Eddie asked.

Roland glanced at him. "Anything."

It was perhaps three o'clock in the afternoon. They were standing at a point where the Great Road crested a long, rolling drumlin which ran diagonally across the plain like a wrinkle in the world's biggest bed-spread. Below and beyond, the road ran through the first real town they had seen. It looked deserted, but Eddie had not forgotten the conversation that morning. Roland's question—Will a strange dog bite?—no longer seemed quite so Zenny.

"Jake?"

"What?"

Eddie nodded to the butt of the Ruger, which protruded from the waistband of Jake's bluejeans—the extra pair he had tucked into his pack before leaving home.

"Do you want me to carry that?"

Jake glanced at Roland. The gunslinger only shrugged, as if to say It's your

choice.

"Okay." Jake handed it over. He unshouldered his pack, rummaged through it, and brought out the loaded clip. He could remember reaching behind the hanging files in one of his father's desk drawers to get it, but all that seemed to have occurred a long, long time ago. These days, thinking about his life in New York and his career as a student at Piper was like looking into the wrong end of a telescope.

Eddie took the clip, examined it, rammed it home, checked the safety, then stuck the Ruger in his own belt.

"Listen closely and heed me well," Roland said. "If there are people, they'll likely be old and much more frightened of us than we are of them. The younger folk will be long gone. It's unlikely that those left will have firearms—in fact, ours may be the first guns many of them have ever seen, except maybe for a picture or two in the old books. Make no threatening gestures. And the childhood rule is a good one: speak only when spoken to."

"What about bows and arrows?" Susannah asked.

"Yes, they may have those. Spears and clubs, as well."

"Don't forget rocks," Eddie said bleakly, looking down at the cluster of wooden buildings. The place looked like a ghost-town, but who knew for sure? "And if they're hard up for rocks, there's always the cobbles from the road."

"Yes, there's always something," Roland agreed. "But we'll start no trouble ourselves—is that clear?"

They nodded.

"Maybe it would be easier to detour around." Susannah said.

Roland nodded, eyes never leaving the simple geography ahead. Another road crossed the Great Road at the center of the town, making the dilapidated buildings look like a target centered in the telescopic sight of a high-powered rifle. "It would, but we won't. Detouring's a bad habit that's easy to get into. It's always better to go straight on, unless there's a good visible reason not to. I see no reason not to here. And if there are people, well, that might be a good thing. We could do with a little palaver."

Susannah reflected that Roland seemed different now, and she didn't think it was simply because the voices in his mind had ceased. This is the way he was when he still had wars to fight and men to lead and his old friends around him, she thought. How he was before the world moved on and he moved on with it, chasing that man Walter. This is how he was before the Big Empty turned him inward on himself and made him strange.

"They might know what those drum sounds are," Jake suggested.

Roland nodded again. "Anything they know—particularly about the city—would come in handy, but there's no need to think ahead too much about people who may not even be there."

"Tell you what," Susannah said, "I wouldn't come out if I saw us. Four people, three of them armed? We probably look like a gang of those old-time outlaws in your stories, Roland—what do you call them?"

"Harriers." His left hand dropped to the sandalwood grip of his remaining revolver and he pulled it a little way out of the holster. "But no harrier ever born carried one of these, and if there are old-timers in yon village, they'll know it. Let's go."

Jake glanced behind them and saw the bumbler lying in the road with his muzzle

between his short front paws, watching them closely. "Oy!" Jake called. "Oy!" the bumbler echoed, and scrambled to its feet at once. They started down the shallow knoll toward the town with Oy trot-ting along behind them.

4  
Two BUILDINGS ON THE outskirts had been burned; the rest of the town appeared dusty but intact. They passed an abandoned livery stable on the left, a building that might have been a market on the right, and then they were in the town proper—such as it was. There were perhaps a dozen rickety buildings standing on either side of the road. Alleys ran between some of them. The other road, this one a dirt track mostly overgrown with plains grass, ran northeast to southwest. Susannah looked at its northeast arm and thought: Once there were barges on the river, and somewhere down that road there was a landing, and probably another shabby little town, mostly saloons and cribs, built up around it. That was the last point of trade before the barges went on down to the city. The wagons came through this place going to that place and then back again. How long ago was that?

She didn't know—but a long time, from the look of this place. Somewhere a rusty hinge squalled monotonously. Somewhere else one shutter clapped lonesomely to and fro in the plains wind. There were hitching rails, most of them broken, in front of the buildings. Once there had been board sidewalks, but now most of the boards were gone and grass grew up through the holes where they had been. The signs on the buildings were faded, but some were still read-able, written in a bastardized form of English which was, she supposed, what Roland called the low speech. FOOD AND GRAIN, one said, and she guessed that might mean feed and grain. On the false front next to it, below a crude drawing of a plains-buffalo lying in the grass, were the words REST EAT DRINK. Under the sign, batwing doors hung crookedly, moving a little in the wind.

"Is that a saloon?" She didn't know exactly why she was whispering, only that she couldn't have spoken in a normal tone of voice. It would have been like playing "Cinch Mountain Breakdown" on the banjo at a funeral. "It was," Roland said. He didn't whisper, but his voice was low-pitched and thoughtful. Jake was walking close by his side, looking around nervously. Behind them, Oy had closed up his distance to ten yards. He trotted quickly, head swinging from side to side like a pendulum as he examined the buildings.

Now Susannah began to feel it: that sensation of being watched. It was exactly as Roland had said it would be, a feeling sunshine had been replaced by shade.

"There are people, aren't there?" she whispered. Roland nodded.

Standing on the northeast corner of the crossroads was a building with another sign she recognized: HOSTEL, it said, and COTTS. Except for a church with a tilted steeple up ahead, it was the tallest building in town—three stories. She glanced up in time to see a white blur, surely a face, draw away from one of the glassless windows. Suddenly she wanted to get out of here. Roland was setting a slow, deliberate pace, however, and she supposed she knew why. Hurrying might give the watchers the impression that they were scared . . . and that they could

be taken. All the same—

At the crossroads the intersecting streets widened out, creating a town square which had been overrun by grass and weeds. In the center was an eroded stone marker. Above it, a metal box hung on a sagging length of rusty cable.

Roland, with Jake by his side, walked toward the marker. Eddie pushed Susannah's chair after. Grass whispered in its spokes and the wind tickled a lock of hair against her cheek. Further along the street, the shutter banged and the hinge squealed. She shivered and brushed the hair away.

"I wish he'd hurry up," Eddie said in a low voice. "This place gives me the creeps."

Susannah nodded. She looked around the square and again she could almost see how it must have been on market-day—the sidewalks thronged with people, a few of them town ladies with their baskets over their arms, most of them waggoners and roughly-dressed bargemen (she did not know why she was so sure of the barges and bargemen, but she was); the wagons passing through the town square, the ones on the unpaved road raising choking clouds of yellow dust as the drivers flogged their carthorses

(oxen they were oxen)

along. She could see those carts, dusty swatches of canvas tied down over bales of cloth on some and pyramids of tarred barrels on others; could see the oxen, double-yoked and straining patiently, flicking their ears at the flies buzzing around their huge heads; could hear voices, and laughter, and the piano in the saloon pounding out a lively tune like "Buffalo Gals" or "Darlin' Katy."

It's as if I lived here in another life, she thought.

The gunslinger bent over the inscription on the marker. "Great Road," he read.

"Lud, one hundred and sixty wheels."

"Wheels?" Jake asked.

"An old form of measurement."

"Have you heard of Lud?" Eddie asked.

"Perhaps," the gunslinger said. "When I was very small."

"It rhymes with crud," Eddie said. "Maybe not such a good sign."

Jake was examining the east side of the stone. "River Road. It's written funny, but that's what it says."

Eddie looked at the west side of the marker. "It says Jimtown, forty wheels.

Isn't that the birthplace of Wayne Newton, Roland?"

Roland looked at him blankly.

"Shet ma mouf," Eddie said, and rolled his eyes.

On the southwest corner of the square was the town's only stone building—a squat, dusty cube with rusty bars on the windows. Combination county jail and courthouse, Susannah thought. She had seen similar ones down south; add a few slant parking spaces in front and you wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Something had been daubed across the facade of the building in fading yellow paint. She could read it, and although she couldn't understand it, it made her more anxious than ever to get out of this town. PUBES DIE, it said.

"Roland!" When she had his attention, she pointed at the graffito. "What does that mean?"

He read it, then shook his head. "Don't know."

She looked around again. The square now seemed smaller, and the buildings seemed to be leaning over them. "Can we get out of here?"

"Soon." He bent down and pried a small chunk of cobble out of the roadbed. He bounced it thoughtfully in his left hand as he looked up at the metal box which hung over the marker. He cocked his arm and Susannah realized, an instant too late, what he meant to do.

"No, Roland!" she cried, then cringed back at the sound of her own horrified voice.

He took no notice of her but fired the stone upward. His aim was as true as ever, and it struck the box dead center with a hollow, metallic bang. There was a whir of clockwork from within, and a rusty green flag unfolded from a slot in the side. When it locked in place, a bell rang briskly. Written in large black letters on the side of the flag was the word GO.

"I'll be damned," Eddie said. "It's a Keystone Kops traffic-light. If you hit it again, does it say STOP?"

"We have company," Roland said quietly, and pointed toward the building Susannah thought of as the county courthouse. A man and a woman had emerged from it and were descending the stone steps. You win the kewpie doll, Roland, Susannah thought. They're older n God, the both of em.

The man was wearing bib overalls and a huge straw sombrero. The woman walked with one hand clamped on his naked sunburned shoulder. She wore homespun and a poke bonnet, and as they drew closer to the marker, Susannah saw she was blind, and that the accident which had taken her sight must have been exceedingly horrible. Where her eyes had been there were now only two shallow sockets filled with scar-tissue. She looked both terrified and confused.

"Be they harriers, Si?" she cried in a cracked, quavering voice. "You'll have us killed yet, I'll warrant!"

"Shut up, Mercy," he replied. Like the woman, he spoke with a thick accent Susannah could barely understand. "They ain't harriers, not these. There's a Pube with em, I told you that—ain't no harrier ever been travellin' with a Pube."

Blind or not, she tried to pull away from him. He cursed and caught her arm.

"Quit it, Mercy! Quit it, I say! You'll fall down and do y'self evil, dammit!"

"We mean you no harm," the gunslinger called. He used the High Speech, and at the sound of it the man's eyes lit up with incredulity. The woman turned back, swinging her blind face in their direction.

"A gunslinger!" the man cried. His voice cracked and wavered with excitement. "'Fore God! I knew it were! I knew!"

He began to run across the square toward them, pulling the woman after. She stumbled along helplessly, and Susannah waited for the inevitable moment when she must fall. But the man fell first, going heavily to his knees, and she sprawled painfully beside him on the cobbles of the Great Road.

5

JAKE FELT SOMETHING FURRY against his ankle and looked down. Oy was crouched beside him, looking more anxious than ever. Jake reached down and cautiously stroked his head, as much to receive comfort as to give it. Its fur was silky, incredibly soft. For a moment he thought the bumbler was going to run, but it only looked up at him, licked his hand, and then looked back at the two new people. The man was trying to help the woman to her feet and not succeeding very

well. Her head craned this way and that in avid confusion.

The man named Si had cut his palms on the cobblestones, but he took no notice. He gave up trying to help the woman, swept off his sombrero, and held it over his chest. To Jake the hat looked as big as a bushel basket. "We bid ye welcome, gunslinger!" he cried. "Welcome indeed! I thought all your land had perished from the earth, so I did!"

"I thank you for your welcome," Roland said in the High Speech. He put his hands gently on the blind woman's upper arms. She cringed for a moment, then relaxed and allowed him to help her up. "Put on your hat, old-timer. The sun is hot." He did, then just stood there, looking at Roland with shining eyes. After a moment or two, Jake realized what that shine was. Si was crying.

"A gunslinger! I told you, Mercy! I seen the shooting-iron and told you!"

"No harriers?" she asked, as if unable to believe it. "Are you sure they ain't harriers, Si?"

Roland turned to Eddie. "Make sure of the safety and then give her Jake's gun." Eddie pulled the Ruger from his waistband, checked the safety, and then put it gingerly in the blind woman's hands. She gasped, almost dropped it, then ran her hands over it wonderingly. She turned the empty sockets where her eyes had been up to the man. "A gun!" she whispered. "My sainted hat!"

"Ay, some kind," the old man replied dismissively, taking it from her and giving it back to Eddie, "but the gunslinger's got a real one, and there's a woman got another. She's got a brown skin, too, like my da' said the people of Garlan had."

Oy gave his shrill, whistling bark. Jake turned and saw more people coming up the street—five or six in all. Like Si and Mercy, they were all old, and one of them, a woman hobbling over a cane like a witch in a fairy-tale, looked positively ancient. As they neared, Jake realized that two of the men were identical twins. Long white hair spilled over the shoulders of their patched homespun shirts. Their skin was as white as fine linen, and their eyes were pink. Albinos, he thought.

The crone appeared to be their leader. She hobbled toward Roland's party on her cane, staring at them with gimlet eyes as green as emeralds. Her toothless mouth was tucked deeply into itself. The hem of the old shawl she wore fluttered in the prairie breeze. Her eyes settled upon Roland.

"Hail, gunslinger! Well met!" She spoke the High Speech herself, and, like Eddie and Susannah, Jake understood the words perfectly, although he guessed they would have been gibberish to him in his own world. "Welcome to River Crossing!" The gunslinger had removed his own hat, and now he bowed to her, tapping his throat three times, rapidly, with his diminished right hand. "Thankee-sai, Old Mother."

She cackled freely at this and Eddie suddenly realized Roland had at the same time made a joke and paid a compliment. The thought which had already occurred to Susannah now came to him: This is how he was . . . and this is what he did. Part of it, anyway.

"Gunslinger ye may be, but below your clothes you're but another foolish man," she said, lapsing into low speech.

Roland bowed again. "Beauty has always made me foolish, mother."

This time she positively cawed laughter. Oy shrank against Jake's leg. One of the albino twins rushed forward to catch the ancient as she rocked backward



within her dusty cracked shoes. She caught her balance on her own, however, and made an imperious shooing gesture with one hand. The albino retreated.

"Be ye on a quest, gunslinger?" Her green eyes gleamed shrewdly at him; the puckered pocket of her mouth worked in and out.

"Ay," Roland said. "We go in search of the Dark Tower."

The others only looked puzzled, but the old woman recoiled and forked the sign of the evil eye—not at them, Jake realized, but to the southeast, along the path of the Beam.

"I'm sorry to hear it!" she cried. "For no one who ever went in search of that black dog ever came back! So said my grandfather, and his grandfather before him! Not ary one!"

"Ka," the gunslinger said patiently, as if this explained everything . . . and, Jake was coming to realize, to Roland it did.

"Ay," she agreed, "black dog ka! Well-a-well; ye'll do as ye're called, and live along your path, and die when it comes to the clearing in the trees. Will ye break bread with us before you push on, gunslinger? You and your band of knights?"

Roland bowed again. "It has been long and long since we have broken bread in company other than our own, Old Mother. We cannot stay long, but yes—we'll eat your food with thanks and pleasure."

The old woman turned to the others. She spoke in a cracked and ringing voice—yet it was the words she spoke and not the tone in which they were spoken that sent chills racing down Jake's back: "Behold ye, the return of the White! After evil ways and evil days, the White comes again! Be of good heart and hold up your heads, for ye have lived to see the wheel of ka begin to turn once more!"

6

THE OLD WOMAN, WHOSE name was Aunt Talitha, led them through the town square and to the church with the leaning spire—it was The Church of the Blood Everlasting, according to the faded board on the run-to-riot lawn. Written over the words, in green paint that had faded to a ghost, was another message: DEATH TO GRAYS. She led them through the ruined church, hobbling rapidly along the center aisle past the splintered and overturned pews, down a short flight of stairs, and into a kitchen so different from the ruin above that Susan-nah blinked in surprise. Here everything was neat as a pin. The wooden floor was very old, but it had been faithfully oiled and glowed with its own serene inner light. The black cookstove took up one whole corner. It was immaculate, and the wood stacked in the brick alcove next to it looked both well-chosen and well-seasoned.

Their party had been joined by three more senior citizens, two women and a man who limped along on a crutch and a wooden leg. Two of the women went to the cupboards and began to make themselves busy; a third opened the belly of the stove and struck a long sulphur match to the wood already laid neatly within; a fourth opened another door and went down a short set of narrow steps into what looked like a cold-pantry. Aunt Talitha, meanwhile, led the rest of them into a spacious entry at the rear of the church building. She waved her cane at two trestle tables which had been stored there under a clean but ragged dropcloth, and the two elderly albinos immediately went over and began to wrestle with one of them.

"Come on, Jake," Eddie said. "Let's lend a hand."

"Nawp!" Aunt Talitha said briskly. "We may be old, but we don't need comp'ny to lend a hand! Not yet, youngster!"

"Leave them be," Roland said.

"Old fools'll rupture themselves," Eddie muttered, but he followed the others, leaving the old men to their chosen table.

Susannah gasped as Eddie lifted her from her chair and carried her through the back door. This wasn't a lawn but a showplace, with beds of flowers blazing like torches in the soft green grass. She saw some she recognized—marigolds and zinnias and phlox—but many others were strange to her. As she watched, a horsefly landed on a bright blue petal . . . which at once folded over it and rolled up tight.

"Wow!" Eddie said, staring around. "Busch Gardens!"

Si said, "This is the one place we keep the way it was in the old days, before the world moved on. And we keep it hidden from those who ride through—Pubes, Grays, harriers. They'd bum it if they knew . . . and kill us for keeping such a place. They hate anything nice—all of em. It's the one thing all those bastards have in common."

The blind woman tugged his arm to shush him.

"No riders these days," the old man with the wooden leg said. "Not for a long time now. They keep closer in to the city. Guess they find all they need to keep em well right there."

The albino twins struggled out with the table. One of the old women followed them, urging them to hurry up and get the hell out of her way. She held a stoneware pitcher in each hand.

"Sit ye down, gunslinger!" Aunt Talitha cried, sweeping her hand at the grass. "Sit ye down, all!"

Susannah could smell a hundred conflicting perfumes. They made her feel dazed and unreal, as if this was a dream she was having. She could hardly believe this strange little pocket of Eden, carefully hidden behind the crumbling facade of the dead town.

Another woman came out with a tray of glasses. They were mismatched but spotless, twinkling in the sun like fine crystal. She held the tray out first to Roland, then to Aunt Talitha, Eddie, Susannah, and Jake at the last. As each took a glass, the first woman poured a dark golden liquid into it.

Roland leaned over to Jake, who was sitting tailor-fashion near an oval bed of bright green flowers with Oy at his side. He murmured: "Drink only enough to be polite, Jake, or we'll be carrying you out of town—this is graf—strong apple-beer."

Jake nodded.

Talitha held up her glass, and when Roland followed suit, Eddie, Susannah, and Jake did the same.

"What about the others?" Eddie whispered to Roland.

"They'll be served after the voluntary. Now be quiet."

"Will ye set us on with a word, gunslinger?" Aunt Talitha asked.

The gunslinger got to his feet, his glass upraised in his hand. He lowered his head, as if in thought. The few remaining residents of River Crossing watched him respectfully and, Jake thought, a little fearfully. At last he raised his head again. "Will you drink to the earth, and to the days which have passed upon

it?" he asked. His voice was hoarse, trembling with emotion. "Will you drink to the fullness which was, and to friends who have passed on? Will you drink to good company, well met? Will these things set us on, Old Mother?"

She was weeping, Jake saw, but her face broke into a smile of radiant happiness all the same . . . and for a moment she was almost young. Jake looked at her with wonder and sudden, dawning happiness. For the first time since Eddie had hauled him through the door, he felt the shadow of the doorkeeper truly leave his heart.

"Ay, gunslinger!" she said. "Fair spoken! They'll set us on by the league, so they shall!" She tilted her glass up and drank it at a draught. When the glass was empty, Roland emptied his own. Eddie and Susannah also drank, although less deeply.

Jake tasted his own drink, and was surprised to find he liked it—the brew was not bitter, as he had expected, but both sweet and tart, like cider. He could feel the effects almost at once, however, and he put the glass carefully aside.

Oy sniffed at it, then drew back, and dropped his muzzle on Jake's ankle.

Around them, the little company of old people—the last residents of River Crossing—were applauding. Most, like Aunt Talitha, were weeping openly. And now other glasses—not so fine but wholly serviceable—were passed around. The party began, and a fine party it was on that long summer's afternoon beneath the wide prairie sky.

## 7

EDDIE THOUGHT THE MEAL, he ate that day was the best he had had since the mythic birthday feasts of his childhood, when his mother had made it her business to serve everything he liked—meatloaf and roasted potatoes and corn on the cob and devil's food cake with vanilla ice cream on the side.

The sheer variety of the edibles put before them—especially after the months they had spent eating nothing but lobster meat, deer meat, and the few bitter greens which Roland pronounced safe—undoubtedly had something to do with the pleasure he took in the food, but Eddie didn't think that was the sole answer; he noticed that the kid was packing it away by the plateful (and feeding a chunk of something to the bumbler crouched at his feet every couple of minutes), and Jake hadn't been here a week yet.

There were bowls of stew (chunks of buffalo meat floating in a rich brown gravy loaded with vegetables), platters of fresh biscuits, crocks of sweet white butter, and bowls of leaves that looked like spinach but weren't . . . exactly.

Eddie had never been crazy about greens, but at the first taste of these, some deprived part of him awoke and cried for them. He ate well of everything, but his need for the green stuff approached greed, and he saw Susannah was also helping herself to them again and again. Among the four of them, the travellers emptied three bowls of the leaves.

The dinner dishes were swept away by the old women and the albino twins. They returned with chunks of cake piled high on two thick white plates and a bowl of whipped cream. The cake gave off a sweetly fragrant smell that made Eddie feel as if he had died and gone to heaven.

"Only buffaler cream," Aunt Talitha said dismissively. "No more cows—last one croaked thirty year ago. Buffaler cream ain't no prize-winner, but better'n

nothin, by Daisy!"

The cake turned out to be loaded with blueberries. Eddie thought it beat by a country mile any cake he'd ever had. He finished three pieces, leaned back, and belched ringingly before he could clap a hand over his mouth. He looked around guiltily.

Mercy, the blind woman, cackled. "I heard that! Someone be thankin' the cook, Auntie!"

"Ay," Aunt Talitha said, laughing herself. "So he do."

The two women who had served the food were returning yet again. One carried a steaming jug; the other had a number of thick ceramic cups balanced precariously on her tray.

Aunt Talitha was sitting at the head of the table with Roland by her right hand. Now he leaned over and murmured something in her ear. She listened, her smile fading a little, then nodded.

"Si, Bill, and Till," she said. "You three stay. We are going to have us a little palaver with this gunslinger and his friends, on account of they mean to move along this very afternoon. The rest of you take your coffee in the kitchen and so cut down the babble. Mind you make your manners before you go!"

Bill and Till, the albino twins, remained sitting at the foot of the table. The others formed a line and moved slowly past the travellers. Each of them shook hands with Eddie and Susannah, then kissed Jake on the cheek. The boy accepted this with good grace, but Eddie could see he was both surprised and embarrassed. When they reached Roland, they knelt before him and touched the sandalwood butt of the revolver which jutted from the holster he wore on his left hip. He put his hands on their shoulders and kissed their old brows. Mercy was the last; she flung her arms around Roland's waist and baptized his cheek with a wet, ringing kiss.

"Gods bless and keep ye, gunslinger! If only I could see ye!"

"Mind your manners, Mercy!" Aunt Talitha said sharply, but Roland ignored her and bent over the blind woman.

He took her hands gently but firmly in his own, and raised them to his face.

"See me with these, beauty," he said, and closed his eyes as her fingers, wrinkled and misshapen with arthritis, patted gently over his brow, his cheeks, his lips and chin.

"Ay, gunslinger!" she breathed, lifting the sightless sockets of her eyes to his faded blue ones. "I see you very well! 'Tis a good face, but full of sadness and care. I fear for you and yours."

"Yet we are well met, are we not?" he asked, and planted a gentle kiss on the smooth, worn skin of her forehead.

"Ay—so we are. So we are. Thank'ee for your kiss, gunslinger. From my heart I thank'ee."

"Go on, Mercy," Aunt Talitha said in a gentler voice. "Get your coffee."

Mercy rose to her feet. The old man with the crutch and peg leg guided her hand to the waistband of his pants. She seized it and, with a final salute to Roland and his band, allowed him to lead her away.

Eddie wiped at his eyes, which were wet. "Who blinded her?" he asked hoarsely.

"Harriers," Aunt Talitha said. "Did it with a branding-iron, they did. Said it was because she was looking at em pert. Twenty-five years agone, that was. Drink your coffee, now, all of you! It's nasty when it's hot, but it ain't nothin but

roadmud once it's cold."

Eddie lifted the cup to his mouth and sipped experimentally. He wouldn't have gone so far as to call it roadmud, but it wasn't exactly Blue Mountain Blend, either.

Susannah tasted hers and looked amazed. "Why, this is chicory!" Talitha glanced at her. "I know it not. Dockey is all I know, and dockey-coffee's all we've had since I had the woman's curse—and that curse was lifted from me long, long ago."

"How old are you, ma'am?" Jake asked suddenly.

Aunt Talitha looked at him, surprised, then cackled. "In truth, lad, I disremember. I recall sitting in this same place and having a party to celebrate my eighty, but there were over fifty people settin out on this lawn that day, and Mercy still had her eyes." Her own eyes dropped to the humbler lying at Jake's feet. Oy didn't remove his muzzle from Jake's ankle, but he raised his gold-ringed eyes to gaze at her. "A billy-bumbler, by Daisy! It's been long and long since I've seen a humbler in company with people . . . seems they have lost the memory of the days when they walked with men."

One of the albino twins bent down to pat Oy. Oy pulled away from him.

"Once they used to herd sheep," Bill (or perhaps it was Till) said to Jake. "Did ye know that, youngster?"

Jake shook his head.

"Do he talk?" the albino asked. "Some did, in the old days."

"Yes, he does." He looked down at the humbler, who had returned his head to Jake's ankle as soon as the strange hand left his general area. "Say your name, Oy."

Oy only looked up at him.

"Oy!" Jake urged, but Oy was silent. Jake looked at Aunt Talitha and the twins, mildly chagrined. "Well, he does . . . but I guess he only does it when he wants to."

"That boy doesn't look as if he belongs here," Aunt Talitha said to Roland. "His clothes are strange . . . and his eyes are strange, as well."

"He hasn't been here long." Roland smiled at Jake, and Jake smiled uncertainly back. "In a month or two, no one will be able to see his strangeness."

"Ay? I wonder, so I do. And where does he come from?"

"Far from here," the gunslinger said. "Very far."

She nodded. "And when will he go back?" ^

"Never," Jake said. "This is my home now."

"Gods pity you, then," she said, "for the sun is going down on the world. It's going down forever."

At that Susannah stirred uneasily; one hand went to her belly, as if her stomach was upset.

"Suze?" Eddie asked. "You all right?"

She tried to smile, but it was a weak effort; her normal confidence and self-possession seemed to have temporarily deserted her. "Yes, of course. A goose walked over my grave, that's all."

Aunt Talitha gave her a long, assessing look that seemed to make Susannah uncomfortable . . . and then smiled. "A goose on my grave— ha! I haven't heard that one in donkey's years."

"My dad used to say it all the time." Susannah smiled at Eddie—a stronger smile this time. "And anyway, whatever it was is gone now. I'm fine."

"What do you know about the city, and the lands between here and there?" Roland asked, picking up his coffee cup and sipping. "Are there harriers? And who are these others? These Grays and Pubes?"

Aunt Talitha sighed deeply.

8

"YE'D HEAR MUCH, GUNSLINGER, and we know but little. One thing I do know is this: the city's an evil place, especially for this youngster. Any youngster. Is there any way you can steer around it as you go your course?"

Roland looked up and observed the now familiar shape of the clouds as they flowed along the path of the Beam. In this wide plains sky, that shape, like a river in the sky, was impossible to miss.

"Perhaps," he said at last, but his voice was oddly reluctant. "I suppose we could skirt around Lud to the southwest and pick up the Beam on the far side."

"It's the Beam ye follow," she said. "Ay, I thought so."

Eddie found his own consideration of the city colored by the steadily strengthening hope that when and if they got there, they would find help—abandoned goodies which would aid them in their quest, or maybe even some people who could tell them a little more about the Dark Tower and what they were supposed to do when they got there. The ones called the Grays, for instance—they sounded like the sort of wise old elves he kept imagining.

The drums were creepy, true enough, reminding him of a hundred low-budget jungle epics (mostly watched on TV with Henry by his side and a bowl of popcorn between them) where the fabulous lost cities the explorers had come looking for were in ruins and the natives had degen-erated into tribes of blood-thirsty cannibals, but Eddie found it impossible to believe something like that could have happened in a city that looked, at least from a distance, so much like New York. If there were not wise old elves or abandoned goodies, there would surely be books, at least; he had listened to Roland talk about how rare paper was here, hut every city Eddie had ever been in was absolutely drowning in books. They might even find some working transportation; the equivalent of a Land Rover would be nice. That was probably just a silly dream, but when you had thousands of miles of unknown territory to cover, a few silly dreams were undoubtedly in order, if only to keep your spirits up. And weren't those things at least possible, damn it?

He opened his mouth to say some of these things, but Jake spoke before he could.

"I don't think we can go around," he said, then blushed a little when they all turned to look at him. Oy shifted at his feet.

"No?" Aunt Talitha said. "And why do ye think that, pray tell?"

"Do you know about trains?" Jake asked.

There was a long silence. Bill and Till exchanged an uneasy glance. Aunt Talitha only looked at Jake steadily. Jake did not drop his eyes.

"I heard of one," she said. "Mayhap even saw it. Over there." She pointed in the direction of the Send. "Long ago, when I was but a child and the world hadn't moved on ... or at least not s'far's it has now. Is it Blaine ye speak of, boy?"

Jake's eyes flashed in surprise and recognition. "Yes! Blaine!" Roland was studying Jake closely.

"And how would ye know of Blaine the Mono?" Aunt Talitha asked.

"Mono?" Jake looked blank.

"Ay, so it was called. How would you know of that old lay?"

Jake looked helplessly at Roland, then back at Aunt Talitha. "I don't know how I know."

And that's the truth, Eddie thought suddenly, but it's not all the truth. He knows more than he wants to tell here . . . and I think he's scared.

"This is our business, I think," Roland said in a dry, brisk administrator's voice. "You must let us work it out for ourselves, Old Mother."

"Ay," she agreed quickly. "You'll keep your own counsel. Best that such as us not know."

"What of the city?" Roland prompted. "What do you know of Lud?"

"Little now, but what we know, ye shall hear." And she poured herself another cup of coffee.

9

IT WAS THE TWINS, Bill and Till, who actually did most of the talking, one taking up the tale smoothly whenever the other left off. Every now and then Aunt Talitha would add something or correct something, and the twins would wait respectfully until they were sure she was done. Si didn't speak at all—merely sat with his untouched coffee in front of him, plucking at the pieces of straw which bristled up from the wide brim of his sombrero.

They knew little, indeed, Roland realized quickly, even about the history of their own town (nor did this surprise him; in these latter days, memories faded rapidly and all but the most recent past seemed not to exist), but what they did know was disturbing. Roland was not surprised by this, either.

In the days of their great-great-grandparents, River Crossing had been much the town Susannah had imagined: a trade-stop at the Great Road, modestly prosperous, a place where goods were sometimes sold but more often exchanged. It had been at least nominally part of River Barony, although even then such things as Baronies and Estates o' Land had been passing.

There had been buffalo-hunters in those days, although the trade had been dying out; the herds were small and badly mutated. The meat of these mutant beasts was not poison, but it had been rank and bitter. Yet River Crossing, located between a place they simply called The Land-ing and the village of Jimtown, had been a place of some note. It was on the Great Road and only six days travel from the city by land and three by barge. "Unless the river were low," one of the twins said. "Then it took longer, and my gran'da said there was times when there was barges grounded all the way upriver to Tom's Neck."

The old people knew nothing of the city's original residents, of course, or the technologies they had used to build the towers and turrets; these were the Great Old Ones, and their history had been lost in the furthest reaches of the past even when Aunt Talitha's great-great-grandfa-ther had been a boy.

"The buildings are still standing," Eddie said. "I wonder if the machines the Great Golden Oldies used to build them still run."

"Mayhap," one of the twins said. "If so, young fella, there don't be ary man or woman that lives there now who'd still know how to run em ... or so I believe, so I do."

"Nay," his brother said argumentatively, "I doubt the old ways are entirely lost

to the Grays 'n Pubes, even now." He looked at Eddie. "Our da' said there was once electric candles in the city. There are those who say they mought still burn."

"Imagine that," Eddie replied wonderingly, and Susannah pinched his leg, hard, under the table.

"Yes," the other twin said. He spoke seriously, unaware of Eddie's sarcasm. "You pushed a button and they came on—bright, heatless candles with ary wicks or reservoirs for oil. And I've heard it said that once, in the old days, Quick, the outlaw prince, actually Hew up into the sky in a mechanical bird. But one of its wings broke and he died in a great fall, like Icarus."

Susannah's mouth dropped open. "You know the story of Icarus?"

"Ay, lady," he said, clearly surprised she should find this strange. "He of the beeswax wings."

"Children's stories, both of them," Aunt Talitha said with a sniff. "I know the story of the endless lights is true, for I saw them with my own eyes when I was but a green girl, and they may still glow from time to time, ay; there are those I trust who say they've seen diem on clear nights, although it's been long years since I have myself. But no man ever flew, not even the Great Old Ones."

Nonetheless, there were strange machines in the city, built to do peculiar and sometimes dangerous things. Many of them might still run, but the elderly twins reckoned that none now in the city knew how to start them up, for they hadn't been heard in years.

Maybe that could change, though, Eddie thought, his eyes gleaming. If, that is, an enterprising, travel-minded young man with a little knowl-edge of strange machinery and endless lights came along. It could be just a matter of finding the ON switches. I mean, it really could be that simple. Or maybe they just blew a bunch of fuses—think of that, friends and neighbors! Just replace half a dozen 400-amp Busses and light the whole place up like a Reno Saturday night!

Susannah elbowed him and asked, in a low voice, what was so funny. Eddie shook his head and put a finger to his lips, earning an irritated look from the love of his life. The albinos, meanwhile, were continuing their story, handing its thread back and forth with the unconscious ease which probably nothing but lifetime twinship can provide.

Four or five generations ago, they said, the city had still been quite heavily populated and reasonably civilized, although the residents drove wagons and buckboards along the wide boulevards the Great Old Ones had constructed for their fabulous horseless vehicles. The city-dwellers were artisans and what the twins called "manufactories," and trade both on the river and over it had been brisk.

"Over it?" Roland asked.

"The bridge over the Send still stands," Aunt Talitha said, "or did twenty year ago."

"Ay, old Bill Muffin and his boy saw it not ten year agone," Si agreed, making his first contribution to the conversation.

"What sort of bridge?" the gunslinger asked.

"A great thing of steel cables," one of the twins said. "It stands in the sky like the web of some great spider." He added shyly: "I should like to see it again before I die."

"Probably fallen in by now," Aunt Talitha said dismissively, "and good riddance.



Devil's work." She turned to the twins. "Tell them what's happened since, and why the city's so dangerous now—apart from any haunts that may den there, that is, and I'll warrant there's a power of em. These folks want to get on, and the sun's on the wester."

10

THE REST OF THE story was but another version of a tale Roland of Gilead had heard many times and had, in some measure, lived through himself. It was fragmentary and incomplete, undoubtedly shot through with myth and misinformation, its linear progress distorted by the odd changes—both temporal and directional—which were now taking place in the world, and it could be summed up in a single compound sentence: Once there was a world we knew, but that world has moved on.

These old people of River Crossing knew of Gilead no more than Roland knew of the River Barony, and the name of John Parson, the man who had brought ruin and anarchy on Roland's land, meant nothing to them, but all stories of the old world's passing were similar . . . too similar, Roland thought, to be coincidence.

A great civil war—perhaps in Garlan, perhaps in a more distant land called Porla—had erupted three, perhaps even four hundred years ago. Its ripples had spread slowly outward, pushing anarchy and dissension ahead of them. Few if any kingdoms had been able to stand against those slow waves, and anarchy had come to this part of the world as surely as night follows sunset. At one time, whole armies had been on the roads, sometimes in advance, sometimes in retreat, always confused and without long-term goals. As time passed, they crumbled into smaller groups, and these degenerated into roving bands of harriers. Trade faltered, then broke down entirely. Travel went from a matter of inconvenience to one of danger. In the end, it became almost impossible. Communication with the city thinned steadily and had all but ceased a hundred and twenty years ago.

Like a hundred other towns Roland had ridden through—first with Cuthbert and the other gunslingers cast out of Gilead, then alone, in pursuit of the man in black—River Crossing had been cut off and thrown on its own resources.

At this point Si roused himself, and his voice captured the travellers at once. He spoke in the hoarse, cadenced tones of a lifelong teller of tales—one of those divine fools born to merge memory and mendacity into dreams as airily gorgeous as cobwebs strung with drops of dew.

"We last sent tribute to the Barony castle in the time of my greatgran'da," he said. "Twenty-six men went with a wagon of hides—there was no hard coin anymore by then, o' course, and 'twas the best they could do. It was a long and dangerous journey of almost eighty wheels, and six died on the way. Half fell to harriers bound for the war in the city; the other half died either of disease or devilgrass.

"When they finally arrived, they found the castle deserted but for the rooks and black-birds. The walls had been broken; weeds o'ergrew the Court o' State. There had been a great slaughter on the fields to the west; it were white with bones and red with rusty armor, so my da's gran'da said, and the voices of demons cried out like the east wind from the jawbones o' those who'd fallen there. The village beyond the castle had been burned to the ground and a thousand or more

skulls were posted along the walls of the keep. Our folk left their bounty o' hides without the shattered barbican gate—for none would venture inside that place of ghosts and moaning voices—and began the homeward way again. Ten more fell on that journey, so that of the six-and-twenty who left only ten returned, my great-gran'da one of them . . . but he picked up a ring-worm on his neck and bosom that never left until the day he died. It were the radiation sickness, or so they said. After that, gunslinger, none left the town. We were on our own." They grew used to the depredations of the harriers, Si continued in his cracked but melodious voice. Watches were posted; when bands of riders were seen approaching—almost always moving southeast along the Great Road and the path of the Beam, going to the war which raged endlessly in Lud—the townspeople hid in a large shelter they had dug beneath the church. Casual damages to the town were not repaired, lest they make those roving bands curious. Most were beyond curiosity; they only rode through at a gallop, bows or battle-axes slung over their shoulders, bound for the killing-zones.

"What war is it that you speak of?" Roland asked.

"Yes," Eddie said, "and what about that drumming sound?"

The twins again exchanged a quick, almost superstitious glance.

"We know not of the god-drums," Si told them. "Ary word or watch. The war of the city, now ..."

The war had originally been the harriers and outlaws against a loose confederation of artisans and "manufactories" who lived in the city. The residents had decided to fight instead of allowing the harriers to loot them, burn their shops, and then turn the survivors out into the Big Empty, where they would almost certainly die. And for some years they had successfully defended Lud against the vicious but badly organized groups of raiders which tried to storm across the bridge or invade by boat and barge.

"The city-folk used the old weapons," one of the twins said, "and though their numbers were small, the harriers could not stand against such things with their bows and maces and battle-axes."

"Do you mean the city-people used guns?" Eddie asked.

One of the albinos nodded. "Ay, guns, but not just guns. There were things that hurled the firebangs over a mile or more. Explosions like dynamite, only more powerful. The outlaws—who are now the Grays, as you must ken—could do nothing but lay siege beyond the river, and that was what they did."

Lud became, in effect, the last fortress-refuge of the latter world. The brightest and most able travelled there from the surrounding countryside by ones and twos. When it came to intelligence tests, sneaking through the tangled encampments and front lines of the besiegers was the newcomers' final exam. Most came unarmed across the no-man's-land of the bridge, and those who made it that far were let through. Some were found wanting and sent packing again, of course, but those who had a trade or a skill (or brains enough to learn one) were allowed to stay. Farming skills were particularly prized; according to the stories, every large park in Lud had been turned into a vegetable garden. With the countryside cut off, it was grow food in the city or starve amid the glass towers and metal alleys. The Great Old Ones were gone, their machines were a mystery, and the silent wonders which remained were inedible.

Little by little, the character of the war began to change. The balance of power had shifted to the besieging Grays—so called because they were, on

average, much older than the city-dwellers. Those latter were also growing older, of course. They were still known as Pubes, but in most cases their puberty was long behind them. And they eventually either forgot how the old weapons worked or used them up.

"Probably both," Roland grunted.

Some ninety years ago—within the lifetimes of Si and Aunt Talitha—a final band of outlaws had appeared, one so large that the outriders had gone galloping through River Crossing at dawn and the drogues did not pass until almost sundown. It was the last army these parts had ever seen, and it was led by a warrior prince named David Quick—the same fellow who supposedly later fell to his death from the sky. He had organized the raggle-taggle remnants of the outlaw bands which still hung about the city, killing anyone who showed opposition to his plans. Quick's army of Grays used neither boat nor bridge to attempt entry into the city, but instead built a pontoon bridge twelve miles below it and attacked on the flank.

"Since then the war has guttered like a chimney-fire," Aunt Talitha finished.

"We hear reports every now and then from someone who has managed to leave, ay, so we do. These come a little more often now, for the bridge, they say, is undefended and I think the fire is almost out. Within the city, the Pubes and Grays squabble over the remaining spoils, only I reckon that the descendents of the harriers who followed Quick over the pontoon bridge are the real Pubes now, although they are still called Grays. The descendents of the original city-dwellers must now be almost as old as we are, although there are still some youngers who go to be among them, drawn by the old stories and the lure of the knowl-edge which may still remain there.

"These two sides still keep up their old enmity, gunslinger, and both would desire this young man you call Eddie. If the dark-skinned woman is fertile, they would not kill her even though her legs are short-ended; they would keep her to bear children, for children are fewer now, and although the old sicknesses are passing, some are still born strange."

At this, Susannah stirred, seemed about to say something, then only drank the last of her coffee and settled back into her former listening position.

"But if they would desire the young man and woman, gunslinger, I think they would lust for the boy."

Jake bent and began to stroke Oy's fur again. Roland saw his face and knew what he was thinking: it was the passage under the mountains all over again, just another version of the Slow Mutants.

"You they'd just as soon kill," Aunt Talitha said, "for you are a gunslinger, a man out of his own time and place, neither fish nor fowl, and no use to either side. But a boy can be taken, used, schooled to remember some things and to forget all the others. They've all forgotten whatever it was they had to fight about in the first place; the world has moved on since then. Now they just fight to the sound of them awful drumbeats, some few still young, most of them old enough for the rocking chair, like us here, all of them stupid grots who only live to kill and kill to live." She paused. "Now that you've heard us old cullies to the end, are ye sure it would not be best to go around, and leave them to their business?"

Before Roland could reply, Jake spoke up in a clear, firm voice. "Tell what you know about Blaine the Mono," he said. "Tell about Blaine and Engineer Bob."

"ENGINEER WHO?" EDDIE ASKED, but Jake only went on looking at the old people.

"Track lies over yonder," Si answered at last. He pointed toward the river. "One track only, set up high on a colyum of man-made stone, such as the Old Ones used to make their streets and walls."

"A monorail!" Susannah exclaimed. "Blaine the Monorail!"

"Blaine is a pain," Jake muttered.

Roland glanced at him but said nothing.

"Does this train run now?" Eddie asked Si.

Si shook his head slowly. His face was troubled and uneasy. "No, young sir—but in my lifetime and Auntie's, it did. When we were green and the war of the city still went forrad briskly. We'd hear it before we saw it—a low humming noise, a sound like ye sometimes hear when a bad summer storm's on the way—one that's full of lightning."

"Ay," Aunt Talitha said. Her face was lost and dreaming.

"Then it'd come—Blaine the Mono, twinkling in the sun, with a nose like one of the bullets in your revolver, gunslinger. Maybe two wheels long. I know that sounds like it couldn't be, and maybe it wasn't (we were green, ye must remember, and that makes a difference), but I still think it was, for when it came, it seemed to run along the whole horizon. Fast, low, and gone before you could even see it proper!

"Sometimes, on days when the weather were foul and the air low, it'd shriek like a harpy as it came out of the west. Sometimes it'd come in the night with a long white light spread out before it, and that shriek would wake all of us. It were like the trumpet they say will raise the dead from their graves at the end of the world, so it was."

"Tell em about the bang, Si!" Bill or Till said in a voice which trembled with awe. "Tell em about the godless bang what always came after!"

"Ay, I was just getting to that," Si answered with a touch of annoy-ance. "After it passed by, there would be quiet for a few seconds . . . sometimes as long as a minute, maybe . . . and then there'd come an explosion that rattled die boards and knocked cups off the shelves and sometimes even broke the glass in the window-panes. But never did anyone see ary flash nor fire. It was like an explosion in the world of spirits."

Eddie tapped Susannah on the shoulder, and when she turned to him he mouthed two words: Sonic boom. It was nuts—no train he had ever heard of travelled faster than the speed of sound—but it was also the only thing that made sense.

She nodded and turned back to Si.

"It's the only one of the machines the Great Old Ones made that I've ever seen running with my own eyes," he said in a soft voice, "and if it weren't the devil's work, there be no devil. The last time I saw it was the spring I married Mercy, and that must have been sixty year agone."

"Seventy," Aunt Talitha said with authority.

"And this train went into the city," Rolund said. "From back the way we came . . . from the west . . . from the forest."

"Ay," a new voice said unexpectedly, "but there was another . . . one that went out from the city . . . and mayhap that one still runs."

THEY TURNED. MERCY STOOD by a bed of flowers between the back of the church and the table where they sat. She was walking slowly toward the sound of their voices, with her hands spread out before her.

Si got clumsily to his feet, hurried to her as best he could, and took her hand. She slipped an arm about his waist and they stood there looking like the world's oldest wedding couple.

"Auntie told you to take your coffee inside!" he said.

"Finished my coffee long ago," Mercy said. "It's a bitter brew and I hate it. Besides—I wanted to hear the palaver." She raised a trembling finger and pointed it in Roland's direction. "I wanted to hear his voice. It's fair and light, so it is."

"I cry your pardon, Auntie," Si said, looking at the ancient woman a little fearfully. "She was never one to mind, and the years have made her no better." Aunt Talitha glanced at Roland. He nodded, almost imperceptibly. "Let her come forward and join us," she said.

Si led her over to the table, scolding all the while. Mercy only looked over his shoulder with her sightless eyes, her mouth set in an intractable line. When Si had gotten her seated, Aunt Talitha leaned forward on her forearms and said, "Now do you have something to say, old sister-sai, or were you just beating your gums?"

"I hear what I hear. My ears are as sharp as they ever were, Tali-tha—sharper!" Roland's hand dropped to his belt for a moment. When he brought it back to the table, he was holding a cartridge in his fingers. He tossed it to Susannah, who caught it. "Do you, sai?" he asked.

"Well enough," she said, turning in his direction, "to know that you just threw something. To your woman, I think—the one with the brown skin. Something small. What was it, gunslinger? A biscuit?"

"Close enough," he said, smiling. "You hear as well as you say. Now tell us what you meant."

"There is another mono," she said, "unless 'tis the same one, running a different course. Either way, a different course was run by some mono . . . until seven or eight year ago, anyways. I used to hear it leaving the city and going out into the waste lands beyond."

"Dunghheap!" one of the albino twins ejaculated. "Nothing goes to the waste lands! Nothing can live there!"

She turned her face to him. "Is a train alive, Till Tudbury?" she asked. "Does a machine fall sick with sores and puking?"

Well, Eddie thought of saying, there was this bear . . .

He thought it over a little more and decided it might be better to keep his silence.

"We would have heard it," the other twin was insisting hotly. "A noise like the one Si always tells of—"

"This one didn't make no bang," she admitted, "but I heard that other sound,

that humming noise like the one you hear sometimes after lightning has struck somewhere close. When the wind was strong, blowing out from the city, I heard it." She thrust out her chin and added: "I did hear the bang once, too. From far, far out. The night Big Charlie Wind came and almost blew the steeple off the church. Must have been two hundred wheels from here. Maybe two hundred and fifty."

"Bulldink!" the twin cried. "You been chewing the weed!"

"I'll chew on you, Bill Tudbury, if you don't shut up your honkin. You've no business sayin bulldink to a lady, either. Why—"

"Stop it, Mercy!" Si hissed, but Eddie was barely listening to this exchange of rural pleasantries. What the blind woman had said made sense to him. Of course there would be no sonic boom, not from a train which started its run in Lud; he couldn't remember exactly what the speed of sound was, but he thought it was somewhere in the neighborhood of six hundred and fifty miles an hour. A train starting from a dead stop would take some time getting up to that speed, and by the time it reached it, it would be out of earshot . . . unless the listening conditions happened to be just right, as Mercy claimed they had been on the night when the Big Charlie Wind—whatever that was—had come.

And there were possibilities here. Blaine the Mono was no Land Rover, but maybe . . . maybe ...

"You haven't heard the sound of this other train for seven or eight years, sai?"

Roland asked. "Are you sure it wasn't much longer?"

"Couldn't have been," she said, "for the last time was the year old Bill Muffin took blood-sick. Poor Bill!"

"That's almost ten year agone," Aunt Talitha said, and her voice was queerly gentle.

"Why did you never say you heard such a thing?" Si asked. He looked at the gunslinger. "You can't believe everything she says, lord— always longing to be in the middle of the stage is my Mercy."

"Why, you old slumgullion!" she cried, and slapped his arm. "I didn't say because I didn't want to o'ertop the story you're so proud of, but now that it matters what I heard, I'm bound to tell!"

"I believe you, sai," Roland said, "but are you sure you haven't heard the sounds of the mono since then?"

"Nay, not since then. I imagine it's finally reached the end of its path."

"I wonder," Roland said. "Indeed, I wonder very much." He looked down at the table, brooding, suddenly far away from all of them, Choo-choo, Jake thought, and shivered.

13

HALF AN HOUR LATER they were in the town square again, Susannah in her wheelchair, Jake adjusting the straps of his pack while Oy sat at his heel, watching him attentively. Only the town elders had attended the dinner-party in the little Eden behind the Church of the Blood Everlast-ing, it seemed, because when they returned to the square, another dozen people were waiting. They glanced at Susannah and looked a bit longer at Jake (his youth apparently more interesting to them than her dark skin), but it was clearly Roland they had come to see; their wondering eyes were full of ancient awe.

He's a living remnant of a past they only know from stories, Susan-nah thought. They look at him the way religious people would look at one of the saints—Peter or Paul or Matthew—if he decided to drop by the Saturday night bean supper and tell them stories of how it was, traipsing around the Sea of Galilee with Jesus the Carpenter.

The ritual which had ended the meal was now repeated, only this time everyone left in River Crossing participated. They shuffled forward in a line, shaking hands with Eddie and Susannah, kissing Jake on the cheek or forehead, then kneeling in front of Roland for his touch and his blessing. Mercy threw her arms about him and pressed her blind face against his stomach. Roland hugged her back and thanked her for her news.

"Will ye not stay the night with us, gunslinger? Sunset comes on apace, and it's been long since you and yours spent the night beneath a roof, I'll warrant."

"It has been, but it's best we go on. Thankee-sai."

"Will ye come again if ye may, gunslinger?"

"Yes," Roland said, but Eddie did not need to look into his strange friend's face to know the chances were small. "If we can."

"Ay." She Imaged him a final time, then passed on with her hand resting on Si's sunburned shoulder. "Fare ye well."

Aunt Talitha came last. When she began to kneel, Roland caught her by the shoulders. "No, sai. You shall not do." And before Eddie's amazed eyes, Roland knelt before her in the dust of the town square. "Will you bless me, Old Mother? Will you bless all of us as we go our course?"

"Ay," she said. There was no surprise in her voice, no tears in her eyes, but her voice throbbed with deep feeling, all the same. "I see your heart is true, gunslinger, and that you hold to the old ways of your kind; ay, you hold to them very well. I bless you and yours and will pray that no harm will come to you. Now take this, if you will." She reached into the bodice of her faded dress and removed a silver cross at the end of a fine-link silver chain. She took it off. Now it was Roland's turn to be surprised. "Are you sure? I did not come to take what belongs to you and yours, Old Mother."

"I'm sure as sure can be. I've worn this day and night for over a hundred years, gunslinger. Now you shall wear it, and lay it at the foot of the Dark Tower, and speak the name of Talitha Unwin at the far end of the earth." She slipped the chain over his head. The cross dropped into the open neck of his deerskin shirt as if it belonged there. "Go now. We have broken bread, we have held palaver, we have your blessing, and you have ours. Go your course in safety. Stand and be true." Her voice trembled and broke on the last word.

Roland rose to his feet, then bowed and tapped his throat three times.

"Thankee-sai."

She bowed back, but did not speak. Now there were tears coursing down her cheeks.

"Ready?" Roland asked.

Eddie nodded. He did not trust himself to speak.

"All right," Roland said. "Let's go."

They walked down what remained of the town's high street, Jake pushing Susannah's wheelchair. As they passed the last building (TRADE & CHANGE, the faded sign read), he looked back. The old people were still gathered about the stone marker, a forlorn cluster of humanity in the middle of this wide, empty

plain. Jake raised his hand. Up to this point he had managed to hold himself in, but when several of the old folks—Si, Bill, and Till among them—raised their own hands in return, Jake burst into tears himself.

Eddie put an arm around his shoulders. "Just keep walking, sport," he said in an uneasy voice. "That's the only way to do it."

"They're so old!" Jake sobbed. "How can we just leave them like this? It's not right!"

"It's ka," Eddie said without thinking.

"Is it? Well ka suh-suh-sucks!"

"Yeah, hard," Eddie agreed . . . but he kept walking. So did Jake, and he didn't look back again. He was afraid they would still be there, standing at the center of their forgotten town, watching until Roland and his friends were out of view. And he would have been right.

14

THEY HAD MADE LESS than seven miles before the sky began to darken and sunset colored the western horizon blaze orange. There was a grove of Susannah's eucalyptus trees nearby; Jake and Eddie foraged there for wood.

"I just don't see why we didn't stay," Jake said. "The blind lady invited us, and we didn't get very far, anyway. I'm still so full I'm practically waddling."

Eddie smiled. "Me, too. And I can tell you something else: your good friend Edward Cantor Dean is looking forward to a long and lei-surely squat in this grove of trees first thing tomorrow morning. You wouldn't believe how tired I am of eating deermeat and crapping rabbit-turds. If you'd told me a year ago that a good dump would be the high point of my day, I would have laughed in your face."

"Is your middle name really Cantor?"

"Yes, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't spread it around."

"I won't. Why didn't we stay, Eddie?"

Eddie sighed. "Because we would have found out they needed firewood."

"Huh?"

"And after we got the firewood, we would've found they also needed fresh meat, because they served us the last of what they had. And we'd be real creeps not to replace what we ate, right? Especially when we're packing guns and the best they can probably do is a bunch of bows and arrows fifty or a hundred years old. So we would have gone hunting for them. By then it would be night again, and when we got up the next day, Susannah would be saying we ought to at least make a few repairs before we moved on—oh, not to the front of the town, that'd be dangerous, but maybe in the hotel or wherever it is they live. Only a few days, and what's a few days, right?"

Roland materialized out of the gloom. He moved as quietly as ever, but he looked tired and preoccupied. "I thought maybe you two fell into a quickpit," he said.

"Nope. I've just been telling Jake the facts as I see them."

"So what would have been wrong with that?" Jake- asked. "This Dark Tower thingy has been wherever it is for a long time, right? It's not going anywhere, is it?"

"A few days, then a few more, then a few more." Eddie looked at the branch he had just picked up and threw it aside disgustedly. I'm starting to sound just like him, he thought. And yet he knew that he was only speaking the truth.



"Maybe we'd see that their spring is getting silted up, and it wouldn't be polite to go until we'd dug it out for them. But why stop there when we could take another couple of weeks and build a jackleg waterwheel, right? They're old, and have no more foot." He glanced at Roland, and his voice was tinged with reproach. "I tell you what—when I think of Bill and Till there stalking a herd of wild buffalo, I get the shivers."

"They've been doing it a long time," Roland said, "and I imagine they could show us a thing or two. They'll manage. Meantime, let's get that wood—it's going to be a chilly night."

But Jake wasn't done with it yet. He was looking closely—almost sternly—at Eddie. "You're saying we could never do enough for them, aren't you?"

Eddie stuck out his lower lip and blew hair off his forehead. "Not exactly. I'm saving it would never be any easier to leave than it was today. Harder, maybe, but no easier."

"It still doesn't seem right."

They reached the place that would become, once the fire was lit, just another campsite on the road to the Dark Tower. Susannah had eased herself out of her chair and was lying on her back with her hands behind her head, looking up at the stars. Now she sat up and began to arrange the wood in the way Roland had shown her months ago.

"Right is what all this is about," Roland said. "But if you look too long at the small rights, Jake—the ones that lie close at hand—it's easy to lose sight of the big ones that stand farther off. Things are out of joint—going wrong and getting worse. We see it all around us, but the answers are still ahead. While we were helping the twenty or thirty people left in River Crossing, twenty or thirty thousand more might be suffering or dying somewhere else. And if there is any place in the universe where these things can be set right, it's at the Dark Tower."

"Why? How?" Jake asked. "What is this Tower, anyway?"

Roland squatted beside the fire Susannah had built, produced his flint and steel, and began to flash sparks into the kindling. Soon small flames were growing amid the twigs and dried handfuls of grass. "I can't answer those questions," he said. "I wish I could."

That, Eddie thought, was an exceedingly clever reply. Roland had said I can't answer . . . but that wasn't the same thing as I don't know. Far from it.

15

SUPPER CONSISTED OF WATER and greens. They were all still recovering from the heavy meal they'd eaten in River Crossing; even Oy refused the scraps Jake offered him after the first one or two.

"How come you wouldn't talk back there?" Jake scolded the bum-bier. "You made me look like an idiot!"

"Id-yit!" Oy said, and put his muzzle on Jake's ankle.

"He's talking better all the time," Roland remarked. "He's even starting to sound like you, Jake."

"Ake," Oy agreed, not lifting his muzzle. Jake was fascinated by the gold rings in Oy's eyes; in the flickering light of the fire, they seemed to revolve slowly.

"But he wouldn't talk to the old people."

"Bumblers are choosy about that sort of thing," Roland said. "They're odd creatures. If I had to guess, I'd say this one was driven away by its own pack."

"Why do you think so?"

Roland pointed at Oy's flank. Jake had cleaned off the blood (Oy hadn't enjoyed this, but had stood for it) and the bite was healing, although the bumbler still limped a little. "I'd bet an eagle that's the bite of another bumbler."

"But why would his own pack—"

"Maybe they got tired of his chatter," Eddie said. He had lain down beside Susannah and put an arm about her shoulders.

"Maybe they did," Roland said, "especially if he was the only one of them who was still trying to talk. The others might have decided he was too bright—or too uppity—for their taste. Animals don't know as much about jealousy as people, but they're not ignorant of it, either."

The object of this discussion closed his eyes and appeared to go to sleep . . . but Jake noticed his ears began twitching when the talk resumed.

"How bright are they?" Jake asked.

Roland shrugged. "The old groom I told you about—the one who said a good bumbler is good luck—swore he had one in his youth that could add. He said it told sums either by scratching on the stable floor or pushing stones together with its muzzle." He grinned. It lit his whole face, chasing away the gloomy shadows which had lain there ever since they left River Crossing. "Of course, grooms and fishermen are born to lie."

A companionable silence fell among them, and Jake could feel drowsiness stealing over him. He thought he would sleep soon, and that was fine by him. Then the drums began, coming out of the southeast in rhythmic pulses, and he sat back up. They listened without speaking.

"That's a rock and roll backbeat," Eddie said suddenly. "I know it is. Take away the guitars and that's what you've got left. In fact, it sounds quite a lot like Z.Z. Top."

"Z.Z. who?" Susannah asked.

Eddie grinned. "They didn't exist in your when," he said. "I mean, they probably did, but in '63 they would have been just a bunch of kids going to school down in Texas." He listened. "I'll be goddamned if that doesn't sound just like the backbeat to something like 'Sharp-Dressed Man' or 'Velcro Fly.'"

"Velcro Fly?" Jake said. "That's a stupid name for a song."

"Pretty funny, though," Eddie said. "You missed it by ten years or so, sport."

"We'd better roll over," Roland said. "Morning comes early."

"I can't sleep with that shit going on," Eddie said. He hesitated, then said something which had been on his mind ever since the morning when they had pulled Jake, whitefaced and shrieking, through the door-way and into this world. "Don't you think it's about time we exchanged stories, Roland? We might find out we know more than we think."

"Yes, it's almost time for that. But not in the dark." Roland rolled onto his side, pulled up a blanket, and appeared to go to sleep.

"Jesus," Eddie said. "Just like that." He blew a disgusted little whistle between his teeth.

"He's right," Susannah said. "Come on, Eddie—go to sleep."

He grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. "Yes, Mummy."

Five minutes later he and Susannah were dead to the world, drums or no drums. Jake found that his own sleepiness had stolen away, how-ever. He lay looking up at die strange stars and listening to that steady, rhythmic throbbing coming out of the darkness. Maybe it was the Pubes, boogying madly to a song called "Velcro Fly" while they worked them-selves into a sacrificial killing frenzy. He thought of Blaine the Mono, a train so fast that it travelled across the huge, haunted world trailing a sonic boom behind it, and that led him naturally enough to thoughts of Charlie the Choo-Choo, who had been retired to a forgotten siding when the new Burlington Zephyr arrived, rendering him obsolete. He thought of the expression on Char-lie's face, the one that was supposed to be cheery and pleasant but somehow wasn't. He thought about The Mid-World Railway Company, and the empty lands between St. Louis and Topeka. He thought about how Charlie had been all ready to go when Mr. Martin needed him, and how Charlie could blow his own whistle and feed his own firebox. He wondered again if Engineer Bob had sabotaged the Burlington Zephyr in order to give his beloved Charlie a second chance. At last—and as suddenly as it had begun—the rhythmic drumming stopped, and Jake drifted off to sleep.

16

HE DREAMED, BUT NOT of the plaster-man.

He dreamed instead that he was standing on a stretch of blacktop highway somewhere in the Big Empty of western Missouri. Oy was with him. Railroad warning signals—white X-shapes with red lights in their centers—flanked the road. The lights were flashing and bells were ringing.

Now a humming noise began to rise out of the southeast getting steadily louder. It sounded like lightning in a bottle.

Here it comes, he told Oy.

Urns! Oy agreed.

And suddenly a vast pink shape two wheels long was slicing across the plain toward them. It was low and bullet-shaped, and when Jake saw it, a terrible fear filled his heart. The two big windows flashing in the sun at the front of the train looked like eyes.

Don't ask it silly questions, Jake told Oy. It won't play silly games. It's just an awful choo-choo train, and its name is Blaine the Pain.

Suddenly Oy leaped onto the tracks and crouched there with his ears flattened back. His golden eyes were blazing. His teeth were bared in a desperate snarl.

No! Jake screamed. No, Oy!

But Oy paid no attention. The pink bullet was bearing down on the l tiny, defiant shape of the billy-bumbler now, and that humming seemed to be crawling all over Jake's skin, making his nose bleed and shattering the fillings in his teeth.

He leaped for Oy, Blaine the Mono (or was it Charlie the Choo-Choo?) bore down on them, and he woke up suddenly, shivering, bathed in sweat. The night seemed to be pressing down upon him like a physical weight. He rolled over and felt frantically for Oy. For a terrible moment he thought the bumbler was gone, and then his fingers found the silky fur. Oy uttered a squeak and looked at him with sleepy curiosity.

"That's all right," Jake whispered in a dry voice. "There's no train. It was

just a dream. Go back to sleep, boy."

"Oy," the humbler agreed, and closed his eyes again.

Jake rolled over on his back and lay looking up at the stars. Blaine is more than a pain, he thought. It's dangerous. Very dangerous.

Yes, perhaps.

No perhaps about it! his mind insisted frantically.

All right, Blaine was a pain—given. But his Final Essay had had something else to say on the subject of Blaine, hadn't it?

Blaine is the truth. Blaine is the truth. Blaine is the truth.

"Oh Jeez, what a mess," Jake whispered. He closed his eyes and was asleep again in seconds. This time his sleep was dreamless.

17

AROUND NOON THE NEXT day they reached the top of another drumlin and saw the bridge for the first time. It crossed the Send at a point where the river narrowed, bent due south, and passed in front of the city.

"Holy Jesus," Eddie said softly. "Does that look familiar to you, Suze?"

"Yes."

"Jake?"

"Yes—it looks like the George Washington Bridge."

"It sure does," Eddie agreed.

"But what's the GWB doing in Missouri?" Jake asked.

Eddie looked at him. "Say what, sport?"

Jake looked confused. "Mid-World, I mean. You know."

Eddie was looking at him harder than ever. "How do you know this is Mid-World?"

You weren't with us when we came to that marker."

Jake stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked down at his mocca-sins.

"Dreamed it," he said briefly. "You don't think I booked this trip with my dad's travel-agent, do you?"

Roland touched Eddie's shoulder. "Let it alone for now." Eddie glanced briefly at Roland and nodded.

They stood looking at the bridge a little longer. They'd had time to get used to the city skyline, but this was something new. It dreamed in the distance, a faint shape sketched against the blue midmorning sky. Roland could make out four sets of impossibly tall metal towers—one set at each end of the bridge and two in the middle. Between them, gigantic cables swooped through the air in long arcs. Between these arcs and the base of the bridge were many vertical lines—either more cables or metal beams, he could not tell which. But he also saw gaps, and realized after a long time that the bridge was no longer perfectly level.

"Yonder bridge is going to be in the river soon, I think," Roland said.

"Well, maybe," Eddie said reluctantly, "but it doesn't really look that bad to me."

Roland sighed. "Don't hope for too much, Eddie."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Eddie heard the touchiness in his voice, but it was too late to do anything about it now.

"It means that I want you to believe your eyes, Eddie—that's all. There was a saying when I was growing up: 'Only a fool believes he's dreaming before he

wakes up.' Do you understand?"

Eddie felt a sarcastic reply on his tongue and banished it after a brief struggle. It was just that Roland had a way—it was unintentional, he was sure, but that didn't make it any easier to deal with—of making him feel like such a kid.

"I guess I do," he said at last. "It means the same thing as my mother's favorite saying."

"And what was that?"

"Hope for the best and expect the worst," Eddie said sourly.

Roland's face lightened in a smile. "I think I like your mother's saying better."

"But it is still standing!" Eddie burst out. "I agree it's not in such fantastic shape—probably nobody's done a really thorough maintenance check on it for a thousand years or so—but it is still there. The whole city is! Is it so wrong to hope we might find some things that'll help us there? Or some people that'll feed us and talk to us, like the old folks back in River Crossing, instead of shooting at us? Is it so wrong to hope our luck might be turning?"

In the silence which followed, Eddie realized with embarrassment that he had been making a speech.

"No." There was a kindness in Roland's voice—that kindness which always surprised Eddie when it came. "It's never wrong to hope." He looked around at Eddie and the others like a man coming out of a deep dream. "We're done travelling for today. It's time we had our own pala-ver, I think, and it's going to take awhile."

The gunslinger left the road and walked into the high grass without looking back. After a moment, the other three followed.

18

UNTIL THEY MET THE old people in River Crossing, Susannah had seen Roland strictly in terms of television shows she rarely watched: Cheyenne, The Rifleman, and, of course, the archetype of them all, Gunsmoke. That was one she had sometimes listened to on tin- radio with her father before it came on TV (she thought of how foreign the idea of radio drama would be to Eddie and Jake and smiled—Roland's was not the only world which had moved on). She could still remember what the narrator said at the beginning of every one of those radio playlets: "It makes a man watchful . . . and a little lonely."

Until River Crossing, that had summed Roland up perfectly for her. He was not broad-shouldered, as Marshal Dillon had been, nor anywhere near as tall, and his face seemed to her more that of a tired poet than a wild-west lawman, but she had still seen him as an existential version of that make-believe Kansas peace officer, whose only mission in life (other than an occasional drink in The Longbranch with his friends Doc and Kitty) had been to Clean Up Dodge.

Now she understood that Roland had once been much more than a cop riding a Daliesque range at the end of the world. He had been a diplomat; a mediator; perhaps even a teacher. Most of all, he had been a soldier of what these people called "the white," by which she guessed they meant the civilizing forces that kept people from killing each other enough of the time to allow some sort of progress. In his time he had been more wandering knight-errant than bounty

hunter. And in many ways, this still was his time; the people of River Crossing had certainly thought so. Why else would they have knelt in the dust to receive his blessing?

In light of this new perception, Susannah could see how cleverly the gunslinger had managed them since that awful morning in the speaking ring. Each time they had begun a line of conversation which would lead to the comparing of notes—and what could be more natural, given the cataclysmic and inexplicable "drawing" each of them had experienced?—Roland had been there, stepping in quickly and turning the conversation into other channels so smoothly that none of them (even she, who had spent almost four years up to her neck in the civil-rights movement) had noticed what he was doing.

Susannah thought she understood why—he had done it in order to give Jake time to heal. But understanding his motives didn't change her own feelings—astonishment, amusement, chagrin—about how neatly he had handled them. She remembered something Andrew, her chauffeur, had said shortly before Roland had drawn her into this world. Something about President Kennedy being the last gunslinger of the western world. She had scoffed then, but now she thought she understood. There was a lot more JFK than Matt Dillon in Roland. She suspected that Roland possessed little of Kennedy's imagination, but when it came to romance . . . dedication . . . charisma . . .

And guile, she thought. Don't forget guile.

She surprised herself by suddenly bursting into laughter.

Roland had seated himself cross-legged. Now he turned toward her, raising his eyebrows. "Something funny?"

"Very. Tell me something—how many languages can you speak?"

The gunslinger thought it over. "Five," he said at last. "I used to speak the Sellian dialects fairly well, but I believe I've forgotten every-thing but the curses."

Susannah laughed again. It was a cheerful, delighted sound. "You a fox, Roland," she said. "Indeed you are."

Jake looked interested. "Say a swear in Strelleran," he said.

"Sellian," Roland corrected. He thought a minute, then said some-thing very fast and greasy—to Eddie it sounded a little as if he was gargling with some very thick liquid. Week-old coffee, say. Roland grinned as he said it.

Jake grinned back. "What does it mean?"

Roland put an arm around the boy's shoulders for a moment. "That we have a lot of things to talk about."

19

"WE ARE KA-TET," ROLAND began, "which means a group of people bound together by fate. The philosophers of my land said a ka-tet could only be broken by death or treachery. My great teacher, Cort, said that since death and treachery are also spokes on the wheel of ka, such a binding can never be broken. As the years pass and I see more, I come more and more to Cort's way of looking at it.

"Each member of a ka-tet is like a piece in a puzzle. Taken by itself, each piece is a mystery, but when they are put together, they make a picture ... or part of a picture. It may take a great many ka-tets to finish one picture. You mustn't be surprised if you discover your lives have been touching in ways you

haven't seen until now. For one thing, each of you three is capable of knowing each other's thoughts—"

"What?" Eddie cried.

"It's true. You share your thoughts so naturally that you haven't even been aware it's happening, but it has been. It's easier for me to see, no doubt, because I am not a full member of this ka-tet—possibly because I am not from your world—and so cannot take part completely in the thought-sharing ability. But I can send. Susannah ... do you remember when we were in the circle?"

"Yes. You told me to let the demon go when you told me. But you didn't say that out loud."

"Eddie ... do you remember when we were in the bear's clearing, and the mechanical bat came at you?"

"Yes. You told me to get down."

"He never opened his mouth, Eddie," Susannah said.

"Yes, you did! You yelled! I heard you, man!"

"I yelled, all right, but I did it with my mind." The gunslinger turned to Jake.

"Do you remember? In the house?"

"When the board I was pulling on wouldn't come up, you told me to pull on the other one. But if you can't read my mind, Roland, how did you know what land of trouble I was in?"

"I saw. I heard nothing, but I saw—just a little, as if through a dirty window."

His eyes surveyed them. "This closeness and sharing of minds is called khef, a word that means many other things in the original tongue of the Old World—water, birth, and life-force are only three of them. Be aware of it. For now, that's all I want."

"Can you be aware of something you don't believe in?" Eddie asked.

Roland smiled. "Just keep an open mind."

"That I can do."

"Roland?" It was Jake. "Do you think Oy might be part of our ka-tet?"

Susannah smiled. Roland didn't. "I'm not prepared to even guess right now, but I'll tell you this, Jake—I've been thinking about your furry friend a good deal.

Ka does not rule all, and coincidences still happen . . . but the sudden appearance of a billy-bumbler that still remembers people doesn't seem completely coincidental to me."

He glanced around at them.

"I'll begin. Eddie will speak next, taking up from the place where I leave off.

Then Susannah. Jake, you'll speak last. All right?"

They nodded.

"Fine," Roland said. "We are ka-tet—one from many. Let the pala-ver begin."

20

THE TALK WENT ON until sundown, stopping only long enough for them to eat a cold meal, and by the time it was over, Eddie felt as if he had gone twelve hard rounds with Sugar Ray Leonard. He no longer doubted that they had been "sharing khef," as Roland put it; he and Jake actually seemed to have been living each other's life in their dreams, as if they were two halves of the same whole.

Roland began with what had happened under the mountains, where Jake's first life in this world had ended. He told of his own palaver with the man in black, and

Walter's veiled words about a Beast and someone he called the Ageless Stranger. He told of the strange, daunting dream which had come to him, a dream in which the whole universe had been swallowed in a beam of fantastic white light. And how, at the end of that dream, there had been a single blade of purple grass. Eddie glanced sideways at Jake and was stunned by the knowledge—the recognition—in the boy's eyes.

21

ROLAND HAD BABBLED PARTS of this story to Eddie in his time of delirium, but it was entirely new to Susannah, and she listened with wide eyes. As Roland repeated the things Walter had told him, she caught glints of her own world, like reflections in a smashed mirror: automobiles, cancer, rockets to the moon, artificial insemination. She had no idea who the Beast might be, but she recognized the name of the Ageless Stranger as a variation upon the name of Merlin, the magician who had supposedly orchestrated the career of King Arthur. Curiouser and curiouser.

Roland told of how he had awakened to find Walter long years dead—time had somehow slipped forward, perhaps a hundred years, perhaps five hundred. Jake listened in fascinated silence as the gunslinger told of reaching the edge of the Western Sea, of how he had lost two of the fingers on his right hand, and how he had drawn Eddie and Susannah before encountering Jack Mort, the dark third.

The gunslinger motioned to Eddie, who took up the tale with the coming of the great bear.

"Shardik?" Jake interjected. "But that's the name of a book! A book in our world! It was written by the man who wrote that famous book about the rabbits—"

"Richard Adams!" Eddie shouted. "And the book about the bunnies was Watership Down! I knew I knew that name! But how can that be, Roland? How is it that the people in your world know about things in ours?"

"There are doors, aren't there?" Roland responded. "Haven't we seen four of them already? Do you think they never existed before, or never will again?"

"But—"

"All of us have seen the leavings of your world in mine, and when I was in your city of New York, I saw the marks of my world in yours. I saw gunslingers. Most were lax and slow, but they were gunslingers all the same, clearly members of their own ancient ka-tet."

"Roland, they were just cops. You ran rings around them."

"Not the last one. When Jack Mort and I were in the underground railway station, that one almost took me down. Except for blind luck—Mort's flint-and-steel—he would have done. That one ... I saw his eyes. He knew the face of his father. I believe he knew it very well. And then ... do you remember the name of Balazar's nightclub?"

"Sure," Eddie said uneasily. "The Leaning Tower. But it could have been coincidence; you yourself said ka doesn't rule everything."

Roland nodded. "You really are like Cuthbert—I remember something he said when we were boys. We were planning a midnight lark in the cemetery, but Alain wouldn't go. He said he was afraid of offending the shades of his fathers and mothers. Cuthbert laughed at him. He said he wouldn't believe in ghosts until he



caught one in his teeth."

"Good for him!" Eddie exclaimed. "Bravo!"

Roland smiled. "I thought you'd like that. At any rate, let's leave this ghost for now. Go on with your story."

Eddie told of the vision which had come to him when Roland threw the jawbone into the fire—the vision of the key and the rose. He told of his dream, and how he had walked through the door of Tom and Gerry's Artistic Deli and into the field of roses which was dominated by the tall, soot-colored Tower. He told of the blackness which had issued from its windows, forming a shape in the sky overhead, speaking directly to Jake now, because Jake was listening with hungry concentration and growing wonder. He tried to convey some sense of the exaltation and terror which had permeated the dream, and saw from their eyes—Jake's most of all—that he was either doing a better job of that than he could have hoped for ... or that they'd had dreams of their own.

He told of following Shardik's backtrail to the Portal of the Bear, and how, when he put his head against it, he'd found himself remembering the day he had talked his brother into taking him to Dutch Hill, so he could see The Mansion. He told about the cup and the needle, and how the pointing needle had become unnecessary once they realized they could see the Beam at work in everything it touched, even the birds in the sky.

Susannah took up the tale at this point. As she spoke, telling of how Eddie had begun to carve his own version of the key, Jake lay back, laced his hands together behind his head, and watched the clouds run slowly toward the city on their straight southeasterly course. The orderly shape they made showed the presence of the Beam as clearly as smoke leaving a chimney shows the direction of the wind.

She finished with the story of how they had finally hauled Jake into this world, closing the split track of his and Roland's memories as suddenly and as completely as Eddie had closed the door in the speaking ring. The only fact she left out was really not a fact at all—at least, not yet. She'd had no morning sickness, after all, and a single missed period meant nothing by itself. As Roland himself might have said, that was a tale best left for another day. Yet as she finished, she found herself wishing she could forget what Aunt Talitha had said when Jake told her this was his home now: Gods pity you, then, for the sun is going down on this world. It's going down forever.

"And now it's your turn, Jake," Roland said.

Jake sat up and looked toward Lud, where the windows of the west-em towers reflected back the late afternoon light in golden sheets. "It's all crazy," he murmured, "but it almost makes sense. Like a dream when you wake up."

"Maybe we can help you make sense of it," Susannah said.

"Maybe you can. At least you can help me think about the train. I'm tired of trying to make sense of Blaine by myself." He sighed. "You know what Roland went through, living two lives at the same time, so I can skip that part. I'm not sure I could ever explain how it felt, anyway, and I don't want to. It was gross. I guess I better start with my Final Essay, because that's when I finally stopped thinking that the whole thing might just go away." He looked around at them somberly. "That was when I gave up."

JAKE TALKED THE SUN down.

He told them everything he could remember, beginning with My Understanding of Truth and ending with the monstrous doorkeeper which had literally come out of the woodwork to attack him. The other three listened without a single interruption.

When he was finished, Roland turned to Eddie, his eyes bright with a mixture of emotions Eddie initially took for wonder. Then he realized he was looking at powerful excitement . . . and deep fear. His mouth went dry. Because if Roland was afraid—

"Do you still doubt that our worlds overlap each other, Eddie?"

He shook his head. "Of course not. I walked down the same street, and I did it in his clothes! But . . . Jake, can I see that book? Charlie the Choo-Choo?"

Jake reached for his pack, but Roland stayed his hand. "Not yet," he said. "Go back to the vacant lot, Jake. Tell that part once more. Try to remember everything."

"Maybe you should hypnotize me," Jake said hesitantly. "Like you did before, at the way station."

Roland shook his head. "There's no need. What happened to you in that lot was the most important thing ever to happen in your life, Jake. In all our lives. You can remember everything."

So Jake went through it again. It was clear to all of them that his experience in the vacant lot where Tom and Gerry's once had stood was the secret heart of the ka-tet they shared. In Eddie's dream, the Artistic Deli had still been standing; in Jake's reality it had been torn down, but in both cases it was a place of enormous, talismanic power. Nor did Roland doubt that the vacant lot with its broken bricks and shattered glass was another version of what Susannah knew as the Drawers and the place he had seen at the end of his vision in the place of bones.

As he told this part of his story for the second time, speaking very slowly now, Jake found that what the gunslinger had said was true: he could remember everything. His recall improved until he almost seemed to be reliving the experience. He told them of the sign which said that a building called Turtle Bay Condominiums was slated to stand on the spot where Tom and Gerry's had once stood. He even remembered the little poem which had been spray-painted on the fence, and recited it for them:

"See the TURTLE of enormous girth!  
On his shell he holds the earth.  
If you want to run and play,  
Come along the BEAM today."

Susannah murmured, "His thought is slow but always kind; He holds us all within his mind . . . isn't that how it went, Roland?"

"What?" Jake asked. "How what went?"

"A poem I learned as a child," Roland said. "It's another connection, one that really tells us something, although I'm not sure it's anything we need to know . . . still, one never knows when a little understanding may come in handy."

"Twelve portals connected by six Beams," Eddie said. "We started at the Bear.

We're only going as far as the middle—to the Tower—but if we went all the way to the other end, we'd come to the Portal of the Turtle, wouldn't we?"

Roland nodded. "I'm sure we would."

"Portal of the Turtle," Jake said thoughtfully, rolling the words in his mouth, seeming to taste them. Then he finished by telling them again about the gorgeous voice of the choir, his realization that there were faces and stories and histories everywhere, and his growing belief that he had stumbled on something very like the core of all existence. Last of all, he told them again about finding the key and seeing the rose. In the totality of his recall, Jake began to weep, although he seemed unaware of it.

"When it opened," he said, "I saw the middle was the brightest yellow you ever saw in your life. At first I thought it was pollen and it only looked bright because everything in that lot looked bright. Even looking at the old candy-wrappers and beer-bottles was like looking at the greatest paintings you ever saw. Only then I realized it was a sun. I know it sounds crazy, but that's what it was. Only it was more than one. It was—"

"It was all suns," Roland murmured. "It was everything real." "Yes! And it was right—but it was wrong, too. I can't explain how it was wrong, but it was. It was like two heartbeats, one inside of the other, and the one inside had a disease. Or an infection. And then I fainted."

23

"You SAW THE SAME thing at the end of your dream, Roland, didn't you?" Susannah asked. Her voice was soft with awe. "The blade of grass you saw near the end of it ... you thought that blade was purple because it was splattered with paint."

"You don't understand," Jake said. "It really was purple. When I was seeing it the way it really was, it was purple. Like no grass I ever saw before. The paint was just camouflage. The way the doorkeeper camouflaged itself to look like an old deserted house."

The sun had reached the horizon. Roland asked Jake if he would now show them Charlie the Choo-Choo and then read it to them. Jake handed the book around. Both Eddie and Susannah looked at the cover for a long time.

"I had this book when I was a little lad," Eddie said at last. He spoke in the flat tones of utter surety. "Then we moved from Queens to Brooklyn—I wasn't even four years old—and I lost it. But I remember the picture on the cover. And I felt the same way you do, Jake. I didn't like it. I didn't trust it."

Susannah raised her eyes to look at Eddie. "I had it, too—how could I ever forget the little girl with my name . . . although of course it was my middle name back in those days. And I felt the same way about the train. I didn't like it and I didn't trust it." She tapped the front of the book with her finger before passing it on to Roland. "I thought that smile was a great big fake."

Roland gave it only a cursory glance before returning his eyes to Susannah. "Did you lose yours, too?"

"Yes."

"And I'll bet I know when," Eddie said.

Susannah nodded. "I'll bet you do. It was after that man dropped the brick on my head. I had it when we went north to my Aunt Blue's wedding. I had it on the train. I remember, because I kept asking my dad if Charlie the Choo-Choo was

pulling us. I didn't want it to be Charlie, because we were supposed to go to Elizabeth, New Jersey, and I thought Charlie might take us anywhere. Didn't he end up pulling folks around a toy village or something like that, Jake?"

"An amusement park."

"Yes, of course it was. There's a picture of him hauling kids around that place at the end, isn't there? They're all smiling and laughing, except I always thought they looked like they were screaming to be let off."

"Yes!" Jake cried. "Yes, that's right! That's just right!"

"I thought Charlie might take us to his place—wherever he lived— instead of to my Aunt's wedding, and never let us go home again."

"You can't go home again," Eddie muttered, and ran his hands nervously through his hair.

"All the time we were on that train I wouldn't let go of the book. I even remember thinking, 'If he tries to steal us, I'll rip out his pages until he quits.' But of course we arrived right where we were supposed to, and on time, too. Daddy even took me up front, so I could see the engine. It was a diesel, not a steam engine, and I remember that made me happy. Then, after the wedding, that man Mort dropped the brick on me and I was in a coma for a long time. I never saw Charlie the Choo-Choo after that. Not until now." She hesitated, then added: "This could be my copy, for all I know—or Eddie's."

"Yeah, and probably is," Eddie said. His face was pale and solemn . . . and then he grinned like a lad. " 'See the TURTLE, ain't he keen? All things serve the fuckin Beam.' "

Roland glanced west. "The sun's going down. Read the story before we lose the light, Jake."

Jake turned to the first page, showed them the picture of Engineer Bob in Charlie's cab, and began: " 'Bob Brooks was an engineer for The Mid-World Railway Company, on the St. Louis to Topeka run. . . . ' "

24

" ' . . . AND EVERY NOW AND then the children hear him singing his old song in his soft, gruff voice,' " Jake finished. He showed them the last picture—the happy children who might actually have been screaming— and then closed the book.

The sun had gone down; the sky was purple.

"Well, it's not a perfect fit," Eddie said, "more like a dream where the water sometimes runs uphill—but it fits well enough to scare me silly. This is Mid-World—Charlie's territory. Only his name over here isn't Charlie at all. Over here it's Blaine the Mono."

Roland was looking at Jake. "What do you think?" he asked. "Should we go around the city? Stay away from this train?"

Jake thought it over, head down, hands working distractedly through Oy's thick, silky fur. "I'd like to," he said at last, "but if I've got this stuff about ka right, I don't think we're supposed to."

Roland nodded. "If it's ka, questions of what we're supposed to or not supposed to do aren't even in it; if we tried to go around, we'd find circumstances forcing us back. In such cases it's better to give in to the inevitable promptly instead of putting it off. What do you think, Eddie?"

Eddie thought as long and as carefully as Jake had done. He didn't want anything

to do with a talking train that ran by itself, and whether you called it Charlie the Choo-Choo or Blaine the Mono, everything Jake had told them and read them suggested that it might be a very nasty piece of work. But they had a tremendous distance to cross, and some-where, at the end of it, was the thing they had come to find. And with that thought, Eddie was amazed to discover he knew exactly what he thought, and what he wanted. He raised his head and for almost the first time since he had come to this world, he fixed Roland's faded blue eyes firmly with his hazel ones.

"I want to stand in that field of roses, and I want to see the Tower that stands there. I don't know what comes next. Mourners please omit flowers, probably, and for all of us. But I don't care. I want to stand there. I guess I don't care if Blaine's the devil and the train runs through hell itself on the way to the Tower. I vote we go."

Roland nodded and turned to Susannah.

"Well, I didn't have any dreams about the Dark Tower," she said, "so I can deal with the question on that level—the level of desire, I suppose you'd say. But I've come to believe in ka, and I'm not so numb that I can't feel it when someone starts rapping on my head with his knuckles and saying, 'That way, idiot.' What about you, Roland? What do you think?"

"I think there's been enough talk for one day, and it's time to let it go until tomorrow."

"What about Riddle-De-Dum!—" Jake asked, "do you want to look at that?"

"There'll be time enough for that another day," Roland said. "Let's get some sleep."

25

BUT THE GUNSLINGER LAY long awake, and when the rhythmic drum-ming began again, he got up and walked back to the road. He stood looking toward the bridge and the city. He was every inch the diplomat Susannah had suspected, and he had known the train was the next step on the road they must travel almost from the moment he had heard of it ... but he'd felt it would be unwise to say so. Eddie in particular hated to feel pushed; when he sensed that was being done, he simply lowered his head, planted his feet, made his silly jokes, and balked like a mule. This time he wanted what Roland wanted, but he was still apt to say day if Roland said night, and night if Roland said day. It was safer to walk softly, and surer to ask instead of telling.

He turned to go back . . . and his hand dropped to his gun as he saw a dark shape standing on the edge of the road, looking at him. He didn't draw, but it was a near thing.

"I wondered if you'd be able to sleep after that little performance," Eddie said. "Guess the answer's no."

"I didn't hear you at all, Eddie. You're learning . . . only this time you almost got a bullet in the gut for your pains."

"You didn't hear me because you have a lot on your mind." Eddie joined him, and even by starlight, Roland saw he hadn't fooled Eddie a bit. His respect for Eddie continued to grow. It was Cuthbert Eddie reminded him of, but in many ways he had already surpassed Cuthbert.

If I underestimate him, Roland thought, I'm apt to come away with a bloody paw.

And if I let him down, or do something that looks to him like a double-cross, he'll probably try to kill me.

"What's on your mind, Eddie?"

"You. Us. I want you to know something. I guess until tonight I just assumed that you knew already. Now I'm not so sure."

"Tell me, then." He thought again: How like Cuthbert he is!

"We're with you because we have to be—that's your goddamned ka. But we're also with you because we want to be. I know that's true of me and Susannah, and I'm pretty sure it's true of Jake, too. You've got a good brain, me old khef-mate, but I think you must keep it in a bomb-shelter, because it's bitchin hard to get through sometimes. I want to see it, Roland. Can you dig what I'm telling you? I want to see the Tower." He looked closely into Roland's face, apparently did not see what he'd hoped to find there, and raised his hands in exasperation. "What I mean is I want you to let go of my ears."

"Let go of your ears?"

"Yeah. Because you don't have to drag me anymore. I'm coming of my own accord. We're coming of our own accord. If you died in your sleep tonight, we'd bury you and then go on. We probably wouldn't last long, but we'd die in the path of the Beam. Now do you understand?"

"Yes. Now I do."

"You say you understand me, and I think you do ... but do you believe me, as well?"

Of course, he thought. Where else do you have to go, Eddie, in this world that's so strange to you? And what else could you do? You'd make a piss-poor farmer. But that was mean and unfair, and he knew it. Denigrating free will by confusing it with ka was worse than blasphemy; it was tiresome and stupid. "Yes," he said. "I believe you. Upon my soul, I do."

"Then stop behaving like we're a bunch of sheep and you're the shepherd walking along behind us, waving a crook to make sure we don't trot our stupid selves off the road and into a quicksand bog. Open your mind to us. If we're going to die in the city or on that train, I want to die knowing I was more than a marker on your game-board."

Roland felt anger heat his cheeks, but he had never been much good at self-deception. He wasn't angry because Eddie was wrong but because Eddie had seen through him. Roland had watched him come steadily forward, leaving his prison further and further behind—and Susannah, too, for she had also been imprisoned—and yet his heart had never quite accepted the evidence of his senses. His heart apparently wanted to go on seeing them as different, lesser creatures.

Roland drew in deep air. "Gunslinger, I cry your pardon."

Eddie nodded. "We're running into a whole hurricane of trouble here ... I feel it, and I'm scared to death. But it's not your trouble, it's our trouble. Okay?"

"Yes."

"How bad do you think it can get in the city?"

"I don't know. I only know that we have to try and protect Jake, because the old auntie said both sides would want him. Some of it depends on how long it takes us to find this train. A lot more depends on what happens when we find it. If we had two more in our party, I'd put Jake in a moving box with guns on every side of him. Since we don't, we'll move in column—me first, Jake pushing Susannah

behind, and you on drogue."

"How much trouble, Roland? Make a guess."

"I can't."

"I think you can. You don't know the city, but you know how the people in your world have been behaving since things started to fall apart. How much trouble?"

Roland turned toward the steady sound of the drumbeats and thought it over.

"Maybe not too much. I'd guess the fighting men who are still there are old and demoralized. It may be that you have the straight of it, and some will even offer to help us on our way, as the River Crossing ka-tet did. Mayhap we won't see them at all—they'll see MS, see we're packing iron, and just put their heads down and let us go our way. If that fails, I'm hoping that they'll scatter like rats if we gun a few."

"And if they decide to make a fight of it?"

Roland smiled grimly. "Then, Eddie, we'll all remember the faces of our fathers."

Eddie's eyes gleamed in the darkness, and Roland was once more reminded forcibly of Cuthbert—Cuthbert who had once said he would believe in ghosts when he could catch one in his teeth, Cuthbert with whom he had once scattered breadcrumbs beneath the hangman's gibbet.

"Have I answered all your questions?"

"Nope—but I think you played straight with me this time."

"Then goodnight, Eddie."

"Goodnight."

Eddie turned and walked away. Roland watched him go. Now that he was listening, he could hear him . . . but just barely. He started back himself, then turned toward the darkness where the city of Lud was.

He's what the old woman called a Pube. She said both sides would want him.

You won't let me drop this time?

No. Not this time, not ever again.

But he knew something none of the others did. Perhaps, after the talk he'd just had with Eddie, he should tell them . . . yet he thought he would keep the knowledge to himself a little while longer.

In the old tongue which had once been his world's lingua franca, most words, like khef and ka, had many meanings. The word char, how-ever—char as in Charlie the Choo-Choo—had only one.

Char meant death.

V  
BRIDGE AND  
CITY

1

THEY CAME UPON THE downed airplane three days later.

Jake pointed it out first at midmorning—a flash of light about ten miles away, as if a mirror lay in the grass. As they drew closer, they saw a large dark object at the side of the Great Road.

"It looks like a dead bird," Roland said. "A big one."

"That's no bird," Eddie said. "That's an airplane. I'm pretty sure the glare is sunlight bouncing off the canopy."

An hour later they stood silently at the edge of the road, looking at the ancient wreck. Three plump crows stood on the tattered skin of the fuselage, staring insolently at the newcomers. Jake pried a cobble from the edge of the road and shied it at them. The crows lumbered into the air, cawing indignantly. One wing had broken off in the crash and lay thirty yards away, a shadow like a diving board in the tall grass. The rest of the plane was pretty much intact. The canopy had cracked in a starburst pattern where the pilot's head had struck it. There was a large, rust-colored stain there.

Oy trotted over to where three rusty propeller blades rose from the grass, sniffed at them, then returned hastily to Jake.

The man in the cockpit was a dust-dry mummy wearing a padded leather vest and a helmet with a spike on top. His lips were gone, his teeth exposed in a final desperate grimace. Fingers which had once been as large as sausages but were now only skin-covered bones clutched the wheel. His skull was caved in where it had hit the canopy, and Roland guessed that the greenish-gray scales which coated the left side of his face were all that remained of his brains. The dead man's head was tilted back, as if he had been sure, even at the moment of his death, that he could regain the sky again. The plane's remaining wing still jutted from the encroaching grass. On it was a fading insignia which depicted a fist holding a thunderbolt.

"Looks like Aunt Talitha was wrong and the old albino man had the right of it, after all," Susannah said in an awed voice. "That must be David Quick, the outlaw prince. Look at the size of him, Roland—they must have had to grease him to get him into the cockpit!"

Roland nodded. The heat and the years had wasted the man in the mechanical bird to no more than a skeleton wrapped in dry hide, but he could still see how broad the shoulders had been, and the misshapen head was massive. "So fell Lord Perth," he said, "and the countryside did shake with that thunder."

Jake looked at him questioningly.

"It's from an old poem. Lord Perth was a giant who went forth to war with a thousand men, but he was still in his own country when a little boy threw a stone at him and hit him in the knee. He stumbled, the weight of his armor bore him down, and he broke his neck in the fall."

Jake said, "Like our story of David and Goliath."

"There was no fire," Eddie said. "I bet he just ran out of gas and tried a dead-stick landing on the road. He might have been an outlaw and a barbarian, but he had a yard of guts."



Roland nodded, and looked at Jake. "You all right with this?"

"Yes. If the guy was still, you know, runny, I might not be." Jake looked from the dead man in the airplane to the city. Lud was much closer and clearer now, and although they could see many broken windows in the towers, he, like Eddie, had not entirely given up hope of finding some sort of help there. "I bet things sort of fell apart in the city once he was gone."

"I think you'd win that bet," Roland said.

"You know something?" Jake was studying the plane again. "The people who built that city might have made their own airplanes, but I'm pretty sure this is one of ours. I did a school paper on air combat when I was in the fifth grade, and I think I recognize it. Roland, can I take a closer look?"

Roland nodded. "I'll go with you."

Together they walked over to the plane with the high grass swishing at their pants. "Look," Jake said. "See the machine-gun under the wing? That's an air-cooled German model, and this is a Focke-Wulf from just before World War II. I'm sure it is. So what's it doing here?"

"Lots of planes disappear," Eddie said. "Take the Bermuda Triangle, for instance. That's a place over one of our oceans, Roland. It's supposed to be jinxed. Maybe it's a great big doorway between our worlds—one that's almost always open." Eddie hunched his shoulders and essayed a bad Rod Serling imitation. "Fasten your seatbelts and prepare for turbulence: you're flying into . . . the Roland Zone!"

Jake and Roland, who were now standing beneath the plane's remaining wing, ignored him.

"Boost me up, Roland."

Roland shook his head. "That wing looks solid, but it's not—this thing has been here a long time, Jake. You'd fall."

"Make a step, then."

Eddie said, "I'll do it, Roland."

Roland studied his diminished right hand for a moment, shrugged, then laced his hands together. "This'll do. He's light."

Jake shook off his moccasin and then stepped lightly into the stirrup Roland had made. Oy began to bark shrilly, though whether in excitement or alarm, Roland couldn't tell.

Jake's chest was now pressing against one of the airplane's rusty flaps, and he was looking right at the fist-and-thunderbolt design. It had peeled up a little from the surface of the wing along one edge. He seized this flap and pulled. It came off the wing so easily that he would have fallen backward if Eddie, standing directly behind him, hadn't steadied him with a hand on the butt.

"I knew it," Jake said. There was another symbol beneath the fist-and-thunderbolt, and now it was almost totally revealed. It was a swastika.

"I just wanted to see it. You can put me down now."

They started out again, but they could see the tail of the plane every time they looked back that afternoon, looming out of the high grass like Lord Perth's burial monument.

gunslinger's satisfaction, he handed Jake his flint and steel. "Let's see how you do."

Eddie and Susannah were sitting off to one side, their arms linked companionably about each other's waist. Toward the end of the day, Eddie had found a bright yellow flower beside the road and had picked it for her. Tonight Susannah was wearing it in her hair, and every time she looked at Eddie, her lips curved in a small smile and her eyes filled with light. Roland had noted these things, and they pleased him. Their love was deepening, strengthening. That was good. It would have to be deep and strong indeed if it was to survive the months and years ahead.

Jake struck a spark, but it flashed inches away from the kindling.

"Move your flint in closer," Roland said, "and hold it steady. And don't hit it with the steel, Jake; scrape it."

Jake tried again, and this time the spark flashed directly into the kindling.

There was a little tendril of smoke but no fire.

"I don't think I'm very good at this."

"You'll get it. Meantime, think on this. What's dressed when night falls and undressed when day breaks?"

"Huh?"

Roland moved Jake's hands even closer to the little pile of kindling. "I guess that one's not in your book."

"Oh, it's a riddle!" Jake struck another spark. This time a small flame glowed in the kindling before dying out. "You know some of those, too?"

Roland nodded. "Not just some—a lot. As a boy, I must have known a thousand. They were part of my studies."

"Really? Why would anyone study riddles?"

"Vannay, my tutor, said a boy who could answer a riddle was a boy who could think around corners. We had riddling contests every Friday noon, and the boy or girl who won could leave school early."

"Did you get to leave early often, Roland?" Susannah asked.

He shook his head, smiling a little himself. "I enjoyed riddling, but I was never very good at it. Vannay said it was because I thought too deeply. My father said it was because I had too little imagination. I think they were both right . . . but I think my father had a little more of the truth. I could always haul a gun faster than any of my mates, and shoot straighter, but I've never been much good at thinking around corners."

Susannah, who had watched closely as Roland dealt with the old people of River Crossing, thought the gunslinger was underrating himself, but she said nothing.

"Sometimes, on winter nights, there would be riddling competitions in the great hall. When it was just the youngers, Alain always won. When the grownups played as well, it was always Cort. He'd forgotten more riddles than the rest of us ever knew, and after the Fair-Day Riddling, Cort always carried home the goose. Riddles have great power, and every-one knows one or two."

"Even me," Eddie said. "For instance, why did the dead baby cross the road?"

"That's dumb, Eddie," Susannah said, but she was smiling.

"Because it was stapled to the chicken!" Eddie yelled, and grinned when Jake burst into laughter, knocking his little pile of kindling apart. "Hyuk, hyuk, hyuk, I got a million of em, folks!"

Roland, however, didn't laugh. He looked, in fact, a trifle offended. "Pardon me

for saying so, Eddie, but that is rather silly."

"Jesus, Roland, I'm sorry," Eddie said. He was still smiling, but he sounded slightly peeved. "I keep forgetting you got your sense of humor shot off in the Children's Crusade, or whatever it was."

"It's just that I take riddling seriously. I was taught that the ability to solve them indicates a sane and rational mind."

"Well, they're never going to replace the works of Shakespeare or the Quadratic Equation," Eddie said. "I mean, let's not get carried away."

Jake was looking at Roland thoughtfully. "My book said riddling is the oldest game people still play. In our world, I mean. And riddles used to be really serious business, not just jokes. People used to get killed over them."

Roland was looking out into the growing darkness. "Yes. I've seen it happen." He was remembering a Fair-Day Riddling which had ended not with the giving of the prize goose but with a cross-eyed man in a cap of bells dying in the dirt with a dagger in his chest. Cort's dagger. The man had been a wandering singer and acrobat who had attempted to cheat Cort by stealing the judge's pocket-book, in which the answers were kept on small scraps of bark.

"Well, excyooose me" Eddie said.

Susannah was looking at Jake. "I forgot all about the book of riddles you carried over. May I look at it now?"

"Sure. It's in my pack. The answers are gone, though. Maybe that's why Mr. Tower gave it to me for fr—"

His shoulder was suddenly seized, and with painful force.

"What was his name?" Roland asked.

"Mr. Tower," Jake said. "Calvin Tower. Didn't I tell you that?"

"No." Roland slowly relaxed his grip on Jake's shoulder. "But now that I hear it, I suppose I'm not surprised."

Eddie had opened Jake's pack and found Riddle-De-Dum! He tossed it to Susannah.

"You know," he said, "I always thought that dead-baby joke was pretty good.

Tasteless, maybe, but pretty good."

"I don't care about taste," Roland said. "It's senseless and unsolvable, and that's what makes it silly. A good riddle is neither."

"Jesus! You guys did take this stuff seriously, didn't you?"

"Yes."

Jake, meanwhile, had been restacking the kindling and mulling over the riddle which had started the discussion. Now he suddenly smiled. "A fire. That's the answer, right? Dress it at night, undress it in the morning. If you change 'dress' to 'build,' it's simple."

"That's it." Roland returned Jake's smile, but his eyes were on Susannah, watching as she thumbed through the small, tattered book. He thought, looking at her studious frown and the absent way she read-justed the yellow flower in her hair when it tried to slip free, that she alone might sense that the tattered book of riddles could be as important as Charlie the Choo-Choo . . . maybe more important. He looked from her to Eddie and felt a recurrence of his irritation at Eddie's foolish riddle. The young man bore another resemblance to Cuthbert, this one rather unfortunate: Roland sometimes felt like shaking him until his nose bled and his teeth fell out.

Soft, gunslinger—soft! Cort's voice, not quite laughing, spoke up in his head, and Roland resolutely put his emotions at arm's length. It was easier to do that

when he remembered that Eddie couldn't help his occasional forays into nonsense; character was also at least partly formed by ka, and Roland knew well that there was more to Eddie than non-sense. Anytime he started to make the mistake of thinking that wasn't so, he would do well to remember their conversation by the side of the road three nights before, when Eddie had accused him of using them as markers on his own private game-board. That had angered him . . . but it had been close enough to the truth to shame him, as well.

Blissfully unaware of these long thoughts, Eddie now inquired: "What's green, weighs a hundred tons, and lives at the bottom of the ocean?"

"I know," Jake said. "Moby Snot, the Great Green Whale."

"Idiocy," Roland muttered.

"Yeah—but that's what's supposed to make it funny," Eddie said. "Jokes are supposed to make you think around comers, too. You see . . ." He looked at Roland's face, laughed, and threw up his hands. "Never mind. I give up. You wouldn't understand. Not in a million years. Let's look at the damned book. I'll even try to take it seriously ... if we can eat a little supper first, that is."

"Watch Me," the gunslinger said with a flicker of a smile.

"Huh?"

"That means you have a deal."

Jake scraped the steel across the flint. A spark jumped, and this time the kindling caught fire. He sat back contentedly and watched the flames spread, one arm slung around Oy's neck. He felt well pleased with him-self. He had started the evening fire . . . and he had guessed the answer to Roland's riddle.

3

"I'VE GOT ONE," JAKE said as they ate their evening burritos.

"Is it a foolish one?" Roland asked.

"Nah. It's a real one."

"Then try me with it."

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

"A good one," Roland said kindly, "but an old one. A river."

Jake was a little crestfallen. "You really are hard to stump."

Roland tossed the last bite of his burrito to Oy, who accepted it eagerly. "Not me. I'm what Eddie calls an overpush. You should have seen Alain. He collected riddles the way a lady collects fans."

"That's pushover, Roland, old buddy," Eddie said.

"Thank you. Try this one: What lies in bed, and stands in bed?/ First white, then red/ The plumper it gets/ The better the old woman likes it?"

Eddie burst out laughing. "A dork!" he yelled. "Crude, Roland! But I like it! I liyyyke it!"

Roland shook his head. "Your answer is wrong. A good riddle is sometimes a puzzle in words, like Jake's about the river, but sometimes it's more like a

magician's trick, making you look in one direction while it's going somewhere else."

"It's a double," Jake said. He explained what Aaron Deepneau had said about the Riddle of Samson. Roland nodded.

"Is it a strawberry?" Susannah asked, then answered her own question. "Of course it is. It's like the fire-riddle. There's a metaphor hidden inside it.

Once you understand the metaphor, you can solve the riddle."

"I metaphor sex, but she slapped my face and walked away when I asked," Eddie told them sadly. They all ignored him.

"If you change 'gets' to 'grows,'" Susannah went on, "it's easy. First white, then red. Plumper it grows, the better the old woman likes it." She looked pleased with herself.

Roland nodded. "The answer I always heard was a wenberry, but I'm sure both answers mean the same thing."

Eddie picked up Riddle-De-Dum! and began flipping through it. "How about this one, Roland? When is a door not a door?"

Roland frowned. "Is it another piece of your stupidity? Because my patience—"

"No. I promised to take it seriously, and I am—I'm trying, at least. It's in this book, and I just happen to know the answer. I heard it when I was a kid."

Jake, who also knew the answer, winked at Eddie. Eddie winked back, and was amused to see Oy also trying to wink. The humbler kept shutting both eyes, and eventually gave up.

Roland and Susannah, meanwhile, were puzzling over the question. "It must have something to do with love," Roland said. "A door, adore. When is adore not adore . . . hmmm . . ."

"Hmmm," Oy said. His imitation of Roland's thoughtful tone was perfect. Eddie winked at Jake again. Jake covered his mouth to hide a smile.

"Is the answer false love?" Roland asked at last.

"Nope."

"Window," Susannah said suddenly and decisively. "When is a door not a door? When it's a window."

"Nope." Eddie was grinning broadly now, but Jake was struck by how far from the real answer both of them had wandered. There was magic at work here, he thought. Pretty common stuff, as magic went, no flying carpets or disappearing elephants, but magic, all the same. He suddenly saw what they were doing—a simple game of riddles around a campfire—in an entirely new light. It was like playing blind-man's bluff, only in this game the blindfold was made of words.

"I give up," Susannah said.

"Yes," Roland said. "Tell if you know."

"The answer is a jar. A door is not a door when it's ajar. Get it?" Eddie watched as comprehension dawned on Roland's face and asked, a little apprehensively, "Is it a bad one? I was trying to be serious this time, Roland—really."

"Not bad at all. On the contrary, it's quite good. Cort would have gotten it, I'm sure . . . probably Alain, too, it's still very clever. I did what I always used to do in the schoolroom: made it more complicated than it really was and shot right past the answer."

"There really is something to it, isn't there?" Eddie mused. Roland nodded, but Eddie didn't see; he was looking into the depths of the fire, where dozens of

roses bloomed and faded in the coals.

Roland said, "One more, and we'll turn in. Only from tonight on, we'll stand a watch. You first, Eddie, then Susannah. I'll take the last one."

"What about me?" Jake asked.

"Later on you may have to take a rum. Right now it's more important for you to get your sleep."

"Do you really think sentry-duty is necessary?" Susannah asked.

"I don't know. And that's the best reason of all to do it. Jake, choose us a riddle from your book."

Eddie handed Riddle-De-Dum! to Jake, who thumbed through the pages and finally stopped near the back. "Whoa! This one's a killer."

"Let's hear it," Eddie said. "If I don't get it, Suze will. We're known at Fair-Days all across the land as Eddie Dean and His Riddling Queen."

"We're witty tonight, ain't we?" Susannah said. "Let's see how witty you are after settin by the side o' the road until midnight or so, honeychild."

Jake read: "There is a thing that nothing is, and yet it has a name. It's sometimes tall and sometimes short, joins our talks, joins our sport, and plays at every game.' "

They discussed this riddle for almost fifteen minutes, but none of them could even hazard an answer.

"Maybe it'll come to one of us while we're asleep," Jake said. "That's how I got the one about the river."

"Cheap book, with the answers torn out," Eddie said. He stood up and wrapped a hide blanket around his shoulders like a cloak.

"Well, it was cheap. Mr. Tower gave it to me for free."

"What am I looking for, Roland?" Eddie asked.

Roland shrugged as he lay down. "I don't know, but I think you'll know it if you see it or hear it."

"Wake me up when you start feeling sleepy," Susannah said.

"You better believe it."

4  
A GRASSY DITCH RAN along the side of the road and Eddie sat on the far side of it with his blanket around his shoulders. A thin scud of clouds had veiled the sky tonight, dimming the starshow. A strong west wind was blowing. When Eddie turned his face in that direction, he could clearly smell the buffalo which now owned these plains—a mixed perfume of hot fur and fresh dung. The clarity which had returned to his senses in these last few months was amazing . . . and, at times like these, a little spooky, as well.

Very faintly, he could hear a buffalo calf bawling.

He turned toward the city, and after a while he began to think he might be seeing distant sparks of light there—the electric candles of the twins' story—but he was well aware that he might be seeing nothing more than his own wishful thinking.

You're a long way from Forty-second Street, sweetheart—hope is a great thing, no matter what anyone says, but don't hope so hard you lose sight of that one thought: you're a long way from Forty-second Street. That's not New York up ahead, no matter how much you might wish it was. That's Lud, and it'll be

whatever it is. And if you keep that in mind, maybe you'll be okay.

He passed his time on watch trying to think of an answer to the last riddle of the evening. The scolding Roland had given him about his dead-baby joke had left him feeling disgruntled, and it would please him to be able to start off the morning by giving them a good answer. Of course they wouldn't be able to check any answer against the back of the book, but he had an idea that with good riddles a good answer was usually self-evident.

Sometimes tall and sometimes short. He thought that was the key and all the rest was probably just misdirection. What was sometimes tall and sometimes short? Pants? No. Pants were sometimes short and some-times long, but he had never heard of tall pants. Tales? Like pants, it only fit snugly one way. Drinks were sometimes both tall and short—

"Order," he murmured, and thought for a moment that he must have stumbled across the solution—both adjectives fit the noun glove-tight. A tall order was a big job; a short order was something you got on the quick in a restaurant—a hamburger or a tuna melt. Except that tall orders and tuna melts didn't join our talk or play at every game.

He felt a rush of frustration and had to smile at himself, getting all wound up about a harmless word-game in a kid's book. All the same, he found it a little easier to believe that people might really kill each other over riddles ... if the stakes were high enough and cheating was involved.

Let it go—you're doing exactly what Roland said, thinking right past it.

Still, what else did he have to think about?

Then the drumming from the city began again, and he did have something else.

There was no build-up; at one moment it wasn't there, and at the next it was going full force, as if a switch had been turned. Eddie walked to the edge of the road, turned toward the city, and lis-tened. After a few moments he looked around to see if the drums had awakened the others, but he was still alone. He turned toward Lud again and cupped his ears forward with the sides of his hands.

Bump . . . ba-bump . . . ba-bump-bumpbump-bump.

Bump . . . ba-bump . . . ba-bump-bumpbump-bump.

Eddie became more and more sure that he had been right about what it was; that he had, at least, solved this riddle.

Bump . . . ba-bump . . . ba-bump-bumpbump-bump.

The idea that he was standing by a deserted road in an almost empty world, standing some one hundred and seventy miles from a city which had been built by some fabulous lost civilization and listening to a rock-and-roll drum-line . . .

that was crazy, but was it any crazier than a traffic-light that dinged and dropped a rusty green flag with the word GO printed on it? Any crazier than discovering the wreck of a German plane from the 1930s?

Eddie sang the words to the Z.Z. Top song in a whisper:

"You need just enough of that sticky stuff  
To hold the seam on your fine blue-jeans  
I say yeah, yeah ..."

They fit the beat perfectly. It was the disco-pulse percussion of "Velcro Fly."  
Eddie was sure of it.

A short time later the sound ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and he could

hear only the wind, and, more faintly, the Send River, which had a bed but never slept.

5

THE NEXT FOUR DAYS were uneventful. They walked; they watched the bridge and the city grow larger and define themselves more clearly; they camped; they ate; they riddled; they kept watch turn and turn about (Jake had pestered Roland into letting him keep a short watch in the two hours just before dawn); they slept.

The only remarkable incident had to do with the bees.

Around noon on the third day after the discovery of the downed plane, a buzzing sound came to them, growing louder and louder until it dominated the day. At last Roland stopped. "There," he said, and pointed toward a grove of eucalyptus trees.

"It sounds like bees," Susannah said.

Roland's faded blue eyes gleamed. "Could be we'll have a little dessert tonight."

"I don't know how to tell you this, Roland," Eddie said, "but I have this aversion to being stung."

"Don't we all," Roland agreed, "but the day is windless. I think we can smoke them to sleep and steal their comb right out from under them without setting half the world on fire. Let's have a look."

He carried Susannah, who was as eager for the adventure as the gunslinger himself, toward the grove. Eddie and Jake lagged behind, and Oy, apparently having decided that discretion was the better part of valor, remained sitting at the edge of the Great Road, panting like a dog and watching them carefully. Roland paused at the edge of the trees. "Stay where you are," he told Eddie and Jake, speaking softly. "We're going to have a look. I'll give you a come-on if all's well." He carried Susannah into the dappled shadows of the grove while Eddie and Jake remained in the sunshine, peering after them.

It was cooler in the shade. The buzzing of the bees was a steady, hypnotic drone. "There are too many," Roland murmured. "This is late summer; they should be out working. I don't—"

He caught sight of the hive, bulging tumorously from the hollow of a tree in the center of the clearing, and broke off.

"What's the matter with them?" Susannah asked in a soft, horrified voice.

"Roland, what's the matter with them?"

A bee, as plump and slow-moving as a horsefly in October, droned past her head. Susannah flinched away from it.

Roland motioned for the others to join them. They did, and stood looking at the hive without speaking. The chambers weren't neat hexa-gons but random holes of all shapes and sizes; the beehive itself looked queerly melted, as if someone had turned a blowtorch on it. The bees which crawled sluggishly over it were as white as snow.

"No honey tonight," Roland said. "What we took from yonder comb might taste sweet, but it would poison us as surely as night follows day."

One of the grotesque white bees lumbered heavily past Jake's head. He ducked away with an expression of loathing.

"What did it?" Eddie asked. "What did it to them, Roland?"



"The same thing that has emptied this whole land; the thing that's still causing many of the buffalo to be born as sterile freaks. I've heard it called the Old War, the Great Fire, the Cataclysm, and the Great Poisoning. Whatever it was, it was the start of all our troubles and it happened long ago, a thousand years before the great-great-grandfathers of the River Crossing folk were born. The physical effects—the two-headed buffalo and the white bees and such—have grown less as time passes. I have seen this for myself. The other changes are greater, if harder to see, and they are still going on."

They watched the white bees crawl, dazed and almost completely helpless, about their hive. Some were apparently trying to work; most simply wandered about, butting heads and crawling over one another. Eddie found himself remembering a newsclip he'd seen once. It had shown a crowd of survivors leaving the area where a gas-main had exploded, flattening almost a whole city block in some California town. These bees reminded him of those dazed, shellshocked survivors. "You had a nuclear war, didn't you?" he asked—almost accused. "These Great Old Ones you like to talk about . . . they blew their great old asses straight to hell. Didn't they?"

"I don't know what happened. No one knows. The records of those times are lost, and the few stories are confused and conflicting."

"Let's get out of here," Jake said in a trembling voice. "Looking at those things makes me sick."

"I'm with you, sugar," Susannah said.

So they left the bees to their aimless, shattered life in the grove of ancient trees, and there was no honey that night.

6

"WHEN ARE YOU GOING to tell us what you do know?" Eddie asked the next morning.

The day was bright and blue, but there was a bite in the air; their first autumn in this world was almost upon them.

Roland glanced at him. "What do you mean?"

"I'd like to hear your whole story, from beginning to end, starting with Gilead. How you grew up there and what happened to end it all. I want to know how you found out about the Dark Tower and why you started chasing after it in the first place. I want to know about your first bunch of friends, too. And what happened to them."

Roland removed his hat, wiped sweat from his brow, then replaced it. "You have the right to know all those things, I suppose, and I'll tell them to you . . . but not now. It's a very long story. I never expected to tell it to anyone, and I'll only tell it once."

"When?" Eddie persisted.

"When the time is right," Roland said, and with that they had to be content.

7

ROLAND CAME AWAKE THE moment before Jake began to shake him. He sat up and looked around, but Eddie and Susannah were still fast asleep and in the first faint light of morning, he could see nothing amiss.

"What is it?" he asked Jake in a low voice.

"I don't know. Fighting, maybe. Come and listen."

Roland threw his blanket aside and followed Jake out to the road. He reckoned they were now only three days' walk from the place where the Send passed in front of the city, and the bridge—built squarely along the path of the Beam—dominated the horizon. Its pronounced tilt was more clearly visible than ever, and he could see at least a dozen gaps where over-stressed cables had snapped like the strings of a lyre.

Tonight the wind blew directly into their faces as they looked toward the city, and the sounds it carried to them were faint but clear.

"Is it fighting?" Jake asked.

Roland nodded and held a finger to his lips.

He heard faint shouts, a crash that sounded like some huge object falling, and—of course—the drums. Now there was another crash, this one more musical: the sound of breaking glass.

"Jeepers," Jake whispered, and moved closer to the gunslinger.

Then came the sounds which Roland had hoped not to hear: a fast, sandy rattle of small-arms fire followed by a loud hollow bang—clearly an explosion of some land. It rolled across the flatlands toward them like an invisible bowling ball. After that, the shouts, thuds, and sounds of breakage quickly sank below the level of the drums, and when the drums quit a few minutes later with their usual unsettling suddenness, the city was silent again. But now that silence had an unpleasant waiting quality.

Roland put an arm around Jake's shoulders. "Still not too late to detour around," he said.

Jake glanced up at him. "We can't."

"Because of the train?"

Jake nodded and singsonged: "Blaine is a pain, but we have to take the train. And the city's the only place where we can get on."

Roland looked thoughtfully at Jake. "Why do you say we have to? Is it ka?"

Because, Jake, you have to understand that you don't know much about ka yet—it's the sort of subject men study all their lives."

"I don't know if it's ka or not, but I do know that we can't go into the waste lands unless we're protected, and that means Blaine. Without him we'll die, like those bees we saw are going to die when winter comes. We have to be protected. Because the waste lands are poison."

"How do you know these things?"

"I don't know!" Jake said, almost angrily. "I just do."

"All right," Roland said mildly. He looked toward Lud again. "But we'll have to be damned careful. It's unlucky that they still have gunpow-der. If they have that, they may have things that are even more powerful. I doubt if they know how to use them, but that only increases the danger. They could get excited and blow us all to hell."

"Ell," a grave voice said from behind them. They glanced around and saw Oy sitting by the side of the road, watching them.

split down the middle by a median divider of some polished dark stone—began to sink, and the crumbling concrete embankments which rose on either side of them gave the pilgrims a claustrophobic trapped feeling. They stopped at a point where one of these concrete dikes had born broken open, affording a comforting line of sight to the open land beyond, and ate a light, unsatisfying meal.

"Why do you think they dropped the road down like this, Eddie?" Jake asked. "I mean, someone did do it this way on purpose, didn't they?"

Eddie looked through the break in the concrete, where the flatlands stretched on as smoothly as ever, and nodded.

"Then why?"

"Dunno, champ," Eddie said, but he thought he did. He glanced at Roland and guessed that he knew, too. The sunken road leading to the bridge had been a defensive measure. Troops placed atop the concrete slopes were in control of two carefully engineered redoubts. If the defenders didn't like the look of the folks approaching Lud along the Great Road, they could rain destruction down on them.

"You sure you don't know?" Jake asked.

Eddie smiled at Jake and tried to stop imagining that there was some nut up there right now, getting ready to roll a large, rusty bomb down one of those decayed concrete ramps. "No idea," he said.

Susannah whistled disgustedly between her teeth. "This road's goin to hell, Roland. I was hoping we were done with that damn harness, but you better get it out again." He nodded and rummaged in his purse for it without a word.

The condition of the Great Road deteriorated as other, smaller roads joined it like tributaries joining a great river. As they neared the bridge, the cobbles were replaced with a surface Roland thought of as metal and the rest of them thought of as asphalt or hot-top. It had not held up as well as the cobbles.

Time had done some damage; the passage of count-less horses and wagons since the last repairs were made had done more. The surface had been chewed into treacherous rubble. Foot travel would be difficult, and the idea of pushing Susannah's wheelchair over that crumbled surface was ridiculous.

The banks on either side had grown steadily steeper, and now, at their tops, they could see slim, pointed shapes looming against the sky. Roland thought of arrowheads—huge ones, weapons made by a tribe of giants. To his companions, they looked like rockets or guided missiles. Susannah thought of Redstones fired from Cape Canaveral; Eddie thought about SAMs, some built to be fired from the backs of flatbed trucks, stored all over Europe; Jake thought of ICBMs hiding in reinforced concrete silos under the plains of Kansas and the unpopulated mountains of Nevada, programmed to hit back at China or the USSR in the event of nuclear armageddon. All of them felt as if they had passed into a dark and woeful zone of shadow, or into a countryside laboring under some old but still powerful curse.

Some hours after they entered this area— Jake called it The Gauntlet—the concrete embankments ended at a place where half a dozen access roads drew together, like the strands of a spiderweb, and here the land opened out again ... a fact which relieved all of them, although none of them said so out loud. Another traffic-light swung over the junction. This one was more familiar to Eddie, Susannah, and Jake; it had once had lenses on its four faces, although the glass had been broken out long ago.

"I'll bet this road was the eighth wonder of the world, once upon a time,"

Susannah said, "and look at it now. It's a minefield."

"Old ways are sometimes the best ways," Roland agreed.

Eddie was pointing west. "Look."

Now that the high concrete barriers were gone, they could see exactly what old Si had described to them over cups of bitter coffee in River Crossing. "One track only," he had said, "set up high on a colyum of man-made stone, such as the Old Ones used to make their streets and walls." The track raced toward them out of the west in a slim, straight line, then flowed across the Send and into the city on a narrow golden trestle. It was a simple, elegant construction—and the only one they had seen so far which was totally without rust—but it was badly marred, all the same. Halfway across, a large piece of the trestle had fallen into the rushing river below. What remained were two long, jutting piers that pointed at each other like accusing fingers. Jutting out of the water below the hole was a streamlined tube of metal. Once it had been bright blue, but now the color had been dimmed by spreading scales of rust. It looked very small from this distance.

"So much for Blaine," Eddie said. "No wonder they stopped hearing it. The supports finally gave way while it was crossing the river and it fell in the drink. It must have been decelerating when it happened, or it would have carried straight across and all we'd see would be a big hole like a bomb-crater in the far bank. Well, it was a great idea while it lasted."

"Mercy said there was another one," Susannah reminded him.

"Yeah. She also said she hadn't heard it in seven or eight years, and Aunt Talitha said it was more like ten. What do you think, Jake . . . Jake? Earth to Jake, Earth to Jake, come in, little buddy."

Jake, who had been staring intently at the remains of the train in the river, only shrugged.

"You're a big help, Jake," Eddie said. "Valuable input—that's why I love you. Why we all love you."

Jake paid no attention. He knew what he was seeing, and it wasn't Blaine. The remains of the mono sticking out of the river were blue. In his dream, Blaine had been the dusty, sugary pink of the bubblegum you got with baseball trading cards.

Roland, meanwhile, had cinched the straps of Susannah's carry-harness across his chest. "Eddie, boost your lady into this contraption. It's time we moved on and saw for ourselves."

Jake now shifted his gaze, looking nervously toward the bridge loom-ing ahead. He could hear a high, ghostly humming noise in the distance—the sound of the wind playing in the decayed steel hangers which connected the overhead cables to the concrete deck below.

"Do you think it'll be safe to cross?" Jake asked.

"We'll find out tomorrow," Roland replied.

9  
THE NEXT MORNING, ROLAND'S band of travellers stood at the end of the long, rusty bridge, gazing across at Lud. Eddie's dreams of wise old elves who had preserved a working technology on which the pilgrims could draw were

disappearing. Now that they were this close, he could see holes in the city-scape where whole blocks of buildings appeared to have been either burned or blasted. The skyline reminded him of a diseased jaw from which many teeth have already fallen.

It was true that most of the buildings were still standing, but they had a dreary, disused look that filled Eddie with an uncharacteristic gloom, and the bridge between the travellers and that shuttered maze of steel and concrete looked anything but solid and eternal. The vertical hangers on the left sagged slackly; the ones remaining on the right almost screamed with tension. The deck had been constructed of hollow concrete boxes shaped like trapezoids. Some of these had buckled upward, displaying empty black interiors; others had slipped askew. Many of these latter had merely cracked, but others were badly broken, leaving gaps big enough to drop trucks—big trucks—into. In places where the bottoms of the box-sections as well as the tops had shattered, they could see the muddy riverbank and the gray-green water of the Send beyond it. Eddie put the distance between the deck and the water as three hundred feet at the center of the bridge. And that was probably a conservative estimate.

Eddie peered at the huge concrete caissons to which the main cables were anchored and thought the one on the right side of the bridge looked as if it had been pulled partway out of the earth. He decided he might do well not to mention this fact to the others; it was bad enough that the bridge was swaying slowly but perceptibly back and forth. Just looking at it made him feel seasick.

"Well?" he asked Roland. "What do you think?"

Roland pointed to the right side of the bridge. Here was a canted walkway about five feet wide. It had been constructed atop a series of smaller concrete boxes and was, in effect, a separate deck. This segmented deck appeared to be supported by an undercable—or perhaps it was a thick steel rod—anchored to the main support cables by huge bow-clamps. Eddie inspected the closest one with the avid interest of a man who may soon be entrusting his life to the object he is studying. The bow-clamp appeared rusty but still sound. The words **LaMERK FOUNDRY** had been stamped into its metal. Eddie was fascinated to realize he no longer knew if the words were in the High Speech or in English.

"I think we can use that," Roland said. "There's only one bad place. Do you see it?"

"Yeah—it's land of hard to miss."

The bridge, which had to be at least three quarters of a mile long, might not have had any proper maintenance for over a thousand years, but Roland guessed that the real destruction might have been going on for only the last fifty or so. As the hangers on the right snapped, the bridge had listed farther and farther to the left. The greatest twist had occurred in the center of the bridge, between the two four-hundred-foot cable-towers. At the place where the pressure of the twist was the great-est, a gaping, eye-shaped hole ran across the deck. The break in the walkway was narrower, but even so, at least two adjoining concrete box-sections had fallen into the Send, leaving a gap at least twenty or thirty feet wide. Where these boxes had been, they could clearly see the rusty steel rod or cable which supported the walkway. They would have to use it to get across the gap.

"I think we can cross," Roland said, calmly pointing. "The gap is inconvenient, but the side-rail is still there, so we'll have something to hold onto."

Eddie nodded, but he could feel his heart pounding hard. The exposed walkway support looked like a big pipe made of jointed steel, and was probably four feet across at the top. In his mind's eye he could see how they would have to edge across, feet on the broad, slightly curved back of the support, hands clutching the rail, while the bridge swayed slowly like a ship in a mild swell.

"Jesus," he said. He tried to spit, but nothing came out. His mouth was too dry.

"You sure, Roland?"

"So far as I can see, it's the only way." Roland pointed downriver and Eddie saw a second bridge. This one had fallen into the Send long ago. The remains stuck out of the water in a rusted tangle of ancient steel.

"What about you, Jake?" Susannah asked.

"Hey, no problem," Jake said at once. He was actually smiling.

"I hate you, kid," Eddie said.

Roland was looking at Eddie with some concern. "If you feel you can't do it, say so now. Don't get halfway across and then freeze up."

Eddie looked along the twisted surface of the bridge for a long time, then nodded. "I guess I can handle it. Heights have never been my favorite thing, but I'll manage."

"Good." Roland surveyed them. "Soonest begun, soonest done. I'll go first, with Susannah. Then Jake, and Eddie's drogue. Can you handle the wheelchair?"

"Hey, no problem," Eddie said giddily.

"Let's go, then."

10

As SOON AS HE stepped onto the walkway, fear filled up Eddie's hollow places like cold water and he began to wonder if he hadn't made a very dangerous mistake. From solid ground, the bridge seemed to be swaying only a little, but once he was actually on it, he felt as if he were standing on the pendulum of the world's biggest grandfather clock. The movement was very slow, but it was regular, and the length of the swings was much longer than he had anticipated. The walkway's surface was badly cracked and canted at least ten degrees to the left. His feet gritted in loose piles of powdery concrete, and the low squealing sound of the box-segments grinding together was constant. Beyond the bridge, the city skyline tilted slowly back and forth like the artificial horizon of the world's slowest-moving video game.

Overhead, the wind hummed constantly in the taut hangers. Below, the ground fell away sharply to the muddy northwest bank of the river. He was thirty feet up ... then sixty . . . then a hundred and ten. Soon he would be over the water. The wheelchair banged against his left leg with every step.

Something furry brushed between his feet and he clutched madly for the rusty handrail with his right hand, barely holding in a scream. Oy went trotting past him with a brief upward glance, as if to say Excuse me—just passing.

"Fucking dumb animal," Eddie said through gritted teeth.

He discovered that, although he didn't like looking down, he had an even greater aversion to looking at the hangers which were still managing to hold the deck and the overhead cables together. They were sleeved with rust and Eddie could see snarls of metal thread poking out of most—these snarls looked like metallic puffs of cotton. He knew from his Uncle Reg, who had worked on both the George

Washington and Triborough bridges as a painter, that the hangers and overhead cables were "spun" from thousands of steel threads. On this bridge, the spin was finally letting go. The hangers were quite literally becoming unravelled, and as they did, the threads were snapping, one interwoven strand at a time.

It's held this long, it'll hold a little longer. You think this thing's going to fall into the river just because you're crossing it? Don't flatter yourself.

He wasn't comforted, however. For all Eddie knew, they might be the first people to attempt the crossing in decades. And the bridge, after all, would have to collapse sometime, and from the look of things, it was going to be soon. Their combined weight might be the straw that broke the camel's back.

His moccasin struck a chunk of concrete and Eddie watched, sick-ened but helpless to look away, as the chunk fell down and down and down, turning over as it went. There was a small—very small—splash when it hit the river. The freshening wind gusted and stuck his shirt against his sweaty skin. The bridge groaned and swayed. Eddie tried to remove his hands from the side-rail, but they seemed frozen to the pitted metal in a deathgrip.

He closed his eyes for a moment. You're not going to freeze. You're not. I ... I forbid it. If you need something to look at, make it long tall and ugly. Eddie opened his eyes again, fixed them on the gunslinger, forced his hands to open, and began to move forward again.

11

ROLAND REACHED THE GAP and looked back. Jake was five feet behind him. Oy was at his heels. The bumbler was crouched down with his neck stretched forward. The wind was much stronger over the river-cut, and Roland could see it rippling Oy's silky fur. Eddie was about twenty-five feet behind Jake. His face was tightly drawn, but he was still shuffling grimly along with Susannah's collapsed wheelchair in his left hand. His right was clutching the rail like grim death.

"Susannah?"

"Yes," she responded at once. "Fine."

"Jake?"

Jake looked up. He was still grinning, and the gunslinger saw there was going to be no problem there. The boy was having the time of his life. His hair blew back from his finely made brow in waves, and his eyes sparkled. He jerked one thumb up. Roland smiled and returned the gesture.

"Eddie?"

"Don't worry about me."

Eddie appeared to be looking at Roland, but the gunslinger decided he was really looking past him, at the windowless brick buildings which crowded the riverbank at the far end of the bridge. That was all right; given his obvious fear of heights, it was probably the best thing he could do to keep his head.

"All right, I won't," Roland murmured. "We're going to cross the hole now, Susannah. Sit easy. No quick movements. Understand?"

"Yes."

"If you want to adjust your position, do it now."

"I'm fine, Roland," she said calmly. "I just hope Eddie will be all right."

"Eddie's a gunslinger now. He'll behave like one."

Roland turned to the right, so he was facing directly downriver, and grasped the

handrail. Then he began to edge out across the hole, shuffling his boots along the rusty cable.

12

JAKE WAITED UNTIL ROLAND and Susannah were part of the way across the gap and then started himself. The wind gusted and the bridge swayed back and forth, but he felt no alarm at all. He was, in fact, totally buzzed. Unlike Eddie, he'd never had any fear of heights; he liked being up here where he could see the river spread out like a steel ribbon under a sky which was beginning to cloud over.

Halfway across the hole in the bridge (Roland and Susannah had reached the place where the uneven walkway resumed and were watching the others), Jake looked back and his heart sank. They had forgotten one member of the party when they were discussing how to cross. Oy was crouched, frozen and clearly terrified, on the far side of the hole in the walkway. He was sniffing at the place where the concrete ended and the rusty, curved support took over.

"Come on, Oy!" Jake called.

"Oy!" the bumbler called back, and the tremble in his hoarse voice was almost human. He stretched his long neck forward toward Jake but didn't move. His gold-ringed eyes were huge and dismayed.

Another gust of wind struck the bridge, making it sway and squall. Something twanged beside Jake's head—the sound of a guitar string which has been tightened until it snaps. A steel thread had popped out of the nearest vertical hanger, almost scratching his cheek. Ten feet away, Oy crouched miserably with his eyes fixed on Jake.

"Come on!" Roland shouted. "Wind's freshening! Come on, Jake!"

"Not without Oy!"

Jake began to shuffle back the way he had come. Before he had gone more than two steps, Oy stepped gingerly onto the support rod. The claws at the ends of his stiffly braced legs scratched at the rounded metal surface. Eddie stood behind the bumbler now, feeling helpless and scared to death.

"That's it, Oy!" Jake encouraged. "Come to me!"

"Oy-Oy! Ake-Ake!" the bumbler cried, and trotted rapidly along the rod. He had almost reached Jake when the traitorous wind gusted again. The bridge swung. Oy's claws scratched madly at the support rod for purchase, but there was none. His hindquarters slued off the edge and into space. He tried to cling with his forepaws, but there was nothing to cling to. His rear legs ran wildly in midair. Jake let go of the rail and dived for him, aware of nothing but Oy's gold-ringed eyes.

"No, Jake!" Roland and Eddie bellowed together, each from his own side of the gap, each too far away to do anything but watch.

Jake hit the cable on his chest and belly. His pack bounced against his shoulderblades and he heard his teeth click together in his head with the sound of a cueball breaking a tight rack. The wind gusted again. He went with it, looping his right hand around the support rod and reaching for Oy with his left as he swayed out into space. The bumbler began to fall, and clamped his jaws on Jake's reaching hand as he did. The pain was immediate and excruciating. Jake screamed but held on, head down, right arm clasping the rod, knees pressing hard



against its wretchedly smooth surface. Oy dangled from his left hand like a circus acrobat, staring up with his gold-ringed eyes, and Jake could now see his own blood flowing along the sides of the bumbler's head in thin streams. Then the wind gusted again and Jake began to slip outward.

13

EDDIE'S FEAR LEFT HIM in its place came that strange yet welcome coldness. He dropped Susannah's wheelchair to the cracked cement with a clatter and raced nimbly out along the support cable, not even both-ering with the handrail. Jake hung head-down over the gap with Oy swinging at the end of his left hand like a furry pendulum. And the boy's right hand was slipping.

Eddie opened his legs and seat-dropped to a sitting position. His undefended balls smashed painfully up into his crotch, but for the moment even this exquisite pain was news from a distant country. He seized Jake by the hair with one hand and one strap of his pack with the other. He felt himself beginning to tilt outward, and for a nightmarish moment he thought all three of them were going to go over in a daisy-chain.

He let go of Jake's hair and tightened his grip on the packstrap, praying the lad hadn't bought the pack at one of the cheap discount outlets. He flailed above his head for the handrail with his free hand. After an interminable moment in which their combined outward slide continued, he found it and seized it.

"ROLAND!" he bawled. "I COULD USE A LITTLE HELP HERE!"

But Roland was already there, with Susannah still perched on his back. When he bent, she locked her arms around his neck so she wouldn't drop headfirst from the sling. The gunslinger wrapped an arm around Jake's chest and pulled him up. When his feet were on the support rod again, Jake put his right arm around Oy's trembling body. His left hand was an agony of fire and ice.

"Let go, Oy," he gasped. "You can let go now we're—safe."

For a terrible moment he didn't think the billy-bumbler would. Then, slowly, Oy's jaws relaxed and Jake was able to pull his hand free. It was covered with blood and dotted with a ring of dark holes.

"Oy," the bumbler said feebly, and Eddie saw with wonder that the animal's strange eyes were full of tears. He stretched his neck and licked Jake's face with his bloody tongue.

"That's okay," Jake said, pressing his face into the warm fur. He was crying himself, his face a mask of shock and pain. "Don't worry, that's okay. You couldn't help it and I don't mind."

Eddie was getting slowly to his feet. His face was dirty gray, and he felt as if someone had driven a bowling ball into his guts. His left hand stole slowly to his crotch and investigated the damage there.

"Cheap fucking vasectomy," he said hoarsely.

"Are you going to faint, Eddie?" Roland asked. A fresh gust of wind flipped his hat from his head and into Susannah's face. She grabbed it and jammed it down all the way to his ears, giving Roland the look of a half-crazed hillbilly.

"No," Eddie said. "I almost wish I could, but—"

"Take a look at Jake," Susannah said. "He's really bleeding."

"I'm fine," Jake said, and tried to hide his hand. Roland took it gently in his own hands before he could. Jake had sustained at least a dozen puncture-wounds

in the back of his hand, his palm, and his fingers.

Most of them were deep. It would be impossible to tell if bones had been broken or tendons severed until Jake tried to flex the hand, and this wasn't the time or place for such experiments.

Roland looked at Oy. The billy-bumbler looked back, his expressive eyes sad and frightened. He had made no effort to lick Jake's blood from his chops, although it would have been the most natural thing in the world for him to have done so.

"Leave him alone," Jake said, and wrapped the encircling arm more tightly about Oy's body. "It wasn't his fault. It was my fault for forgetting him. The wind blew him off."

"I'm not going to hurt him," Roland said. He was positive the billy-bumbler wasn't rabid, but he still did not intend for Oy to taste any more of Jake's blood than he already had. As for any other diseases Oy might be carrying in his blood . . . well, ka would decide, as, in the end, it always did. Roland pulled his neckerchief free and wiped Oy's lips and muzzle. "There," he said. "Good fellow. Good boy."

"Oy," the billy-bumbler said feebly, and Susannah, who was watch-ing over Roland's shoulder, could have sworn she heard gratitude in that voice.

Another gust of wind struck them. The weather was turning dirty, and fast.

"Eddie, we have to get off the bridge. Can you walk?"

"No, massa; I'sa gwinter shuffle." The pain in his groin and the pit of his stomach was still bad, but not quite so bad as it had been a minute ago.

"All right. Let's move. Fast as we can."

Roland turned, began to take a step, and stopped. A man was now standing on the far side of the gap, watching them expressionlessly.

The newcomer had approached while their attention was focused on Jake and Oy. A crossbow was slung across his back. He wore a bright yellow scarf around his head; the ends streamed out like banners in the freshening wind. Gold hoops with crosses in their centers dangled from his ears. One eye was covered with a white silk patch. His face was blotched with purple sores, some of them open and festering. He might have been thirty, forty, or sixty. He held one hand high over his head. In it was something Roland could not make out, except that its shape was too regular to be a stone.

Behind this apparition, the city loomed with a kind of weird clarity in the darkening day. As Eddie looked past the huddles of brick buildings on the other shore—warehouses long since scooped empty by looters, he had no doubt—and into those shadowy canyons and stone mazes, he understood for the first time how terribly mistaken, how terribly foolish, his dreams of hope and help had been.

Now he saw the shattered facades and broken roofs; now he saw the shaggy birds' nests on cornices and in glassless, gaping windows; now he allowed himself to actually smell the city, and that odor was not of fabulous spices and savory foods of the sort his mother had sometimes brought home from Zabar's but rather the stink of a mattress that has caught fire, smoldered awhile, and then been put out with sewer-water. He suddenly understood Lud, understood it completely.

The grinning pirate who had appeared while their attention was elsewhere was probably as close to a wise old elf as this broken, dying place could provide.

Roland pulled his revolver.

"Put it away, my cully," the man in the yellow scarf said in an accent so thick that the sense of his words was almost lost. "Put it away, my dear heart. Ye're

a fierce trim, ay, that's clear, but this time you're outmatched."

14

THE NEWCOMER'S PANTS WERE patched green velvet, and as he stood on the edge of the hole in the bridge, he looked like a buccaneer at the end of his days of plunder: sick, ragged, and still dangerous.

"Suppose I choose not to?" Roland asked. "Suppose I choose to simply put a bullet through your scrofulous head?"

"Then I'll get to hell just enough ahead of ye to hold the door," the man in the yellow scarf said, and chuckled chummily. He wiggled the hand he held in the air. "It's all the same jolly fakement to me, one way or t'other."

Roland guessed that was the truth. The man looked as if he might have a year to live at most . . . and the last few months of that year would probably be very unpleasant. The oozing sores on his face had nothing to do with radiation; unless Roland was badly deceived, this man was in the late stages of what the doctors called mandrus and everyone else called whore's blossoms. Facing a dangerous man was always a bad busi-ness, but at least one could calculate the odds in such an encounter. When you were facing the dead, however, everything changed.

"Do yer know what I've got here, my dear ones?" the pirate asked. "Do yer ken whatcher old friend Gasher just happens to have laid his hands on? It's a grenado, something pretty the Old Folks left behind, and I've already tipped its cap—for to wear one's cap before the introductin' is complete would be wery bad manners, so it would!"

He cackled happily for a moment, and then his face grew still and grave once more. All humor left it, as if a switch had been turned some-where in his degenerating brains.

"My finger is all that's holdin the pin now, dearie. If you shoot me, there's going to be a wery big bang. You and the cunt-monkey on yer back will be vaporized. The squint, too, I reckon. The young buck stand-ing behind you and pointing that toy pistol in my face might live, but only until he hits the water . . . and hit it he would, because this bridge has been hangin by a thread these last forty year, and all it'd take to finish it is one little push. So do ye want to put away your iron, or shall we all toddle off to hell on the same handcart?"

Roland briefly considered trying to shoot the object Gasher called a grenado out of his hand, saw how tightly the man was gripping it, and bolstered his gun.

"Ah, good!" Gasher cried, cheerful once more. "I knew ye was a trig cove, just lookin at yer! Oh yes! So I did!"

"What do you want?" Roland asked, although he thought he already knew this, too. Gasher raised his free hand and pointed a dirty finger at Jake. "The squint. Gimme the squint and the rest of you go free."

"Go fuck yourself," Susannah said at once.

"Why not?" the pirate cackled. "Gimme a chunk of mirror and I'll rip it right off and stick it right in—why not, for all the good it's a-doin me these days? Why, I can't even run water through it without it burns me all the way to the top of my gullywash!" His eyes, which were a strange calm shade of gray, never left Roland's face. "What do you say, my good old mate?"

"What happens to the rest of us if I hand over the boy?"

"Why, you go on yer way without no trouble from us!" the man in the yellow headscarf returned promptly. "You have the Tick-Tock Man's word on that. It comes from his lips to my lips to your ears, so it does, and Tick-Tock's a trig cove, too, what don't break his word once it's been given. I can't say ary word nor watch about any Pubies you might run into, but you'll have no trouble with the Tick-Tock Man's Grays."

"What the fuck are you saying, Roland?" Eddie roared. "You're not really thinking about doing it, are you?"

Roland didn't look down at Jake, and his lips didn't move as he murmured: "I'll keep my promise."

"Yes—I know you will." Then Jake raised his voice and said: "Put the gun away, Eddie. I'll decide."

"Jake, you're out of your mind!"

The pirate cackled cheerily. "Not at all, cully! You're the one who's lost his mind if you disbelieve me. At the wery least, he'll be safe from the drums with us, won't he? And just think—if I didn't mean what I say, I would have told you to toss your guns overside first thing! Easiest thing in the world! But did I? Nay!"

Susannah had heard the exchange between Jake and Roland. She had also had a chance to realize how bleak their options were as things now stood. "Put it away, Eddie."

"How do we know you won't toss the grenade at us once you have the lad?" Eddie called.

"I'll shoot it out of the air if he tries," Roland said. "I can do it, and he knows I can do it."

"Mayhap I do. You've got a cosy look about you, indeed ye do."

"If he's telling the truth," Roland went on, "he'd be burned even if I missed his toy, because the bridge would collapse and we'd all go down together."

"Wery clever, my dear old son!" Gasher said. "You are a cosy one, ain't you?" He cawed laughter, then grew serious and confiding. "The talking's done, old mate of mine. Decide. Will you give me the boy, or do we all march to the end of the path together?"

Before Roland could say a word, Jake had slipped past him on the support rod. He still held Oy curled in his right arm. He held his bloody left hand stiffly out in front of him.

"Jake, no!" Eddie shouted desperately.

"I'll come for you," Roland said in the same low voice.

"I know," Jake repeated. The wind gusted again. The bridge swayed and groaned. The Send was now speckled with whitecaps, and water boiled whitely around the wreck of the blue mono jutting from the river on the upstream side.

"Ay, my cully!" Gasher crooned. His lips spread wide, revealing a few remaining teeth that jutted from his white gums like decayed tomb-stones. "Ay, my fine young squint! Just keep coming."

"Roland, he could be bluffing!" Eddie yelled. "That thing could be a dud!"

The gunslinger made no reply.

As Jake neared the other side of the hole in the walkway, Oy bared his own teeth and began to snarl at Gasher.

"Toss that talking bag of guts overside," Gasher said.

"Fuck you," Jake replied in the same calm voice.

The pirate looked surprised for a moment, then nodded. "Tender of him, are you? Wery well." He took two steps backward. "Put him down the second you reach the concrete, then. And if he runs at me, I promise to lack his brains right out his tender little asshole."

"Asshole," Oy said through his bared teeth.

"Shut up, Oy," Jake muttered. He reached the concrete just as the strongest gust of wind yet struck the bridge. This time the twanging sound of parting cable-strands seemed to come from everywhere. Jake glanced back and saw Roland and Eddie clinging to the rail. Susannah was watching him from over Roland's shoulder, her tight cap of curls rippling and shaking in the wind. Jake raised his hand to them. Roland raised his in return.

You won't let me drop this time? he had asked. No—not ever again, Roland had replied. Jake believed him . . . but he was very much afraid of what might happen before Roland arrived. He put Oy down. Gasher rushed forward the moment he did, kicking out at the small animal. Oy skittered aside, avoiding the booted foot.

"Run!" Jake shouted. Oy did, shooting past them and loping toward the Lud end of the bridge with his head down, swerving to avoid the holes and leaping across the cracks in the pavement. He didn't look back. A moment later Gasher had his arm around Jake's neck. He stank of dirt and decaying flesh, the two odors combining to create a single deep stench, crusty and thick. It made Jake's gorge rise.

He bumped his crotch into Jake's buttocks. "Maybe I ain't quite s'far gone's I thought. Don't they say youth's the wine what makes old men drunk? We'll have us a time, won't we, my sweet little squint? Ay, we'll have a time such as will make the angels sing."

Oh Jesus, Jake thought.

Gasher raised his voice again. "We're leaving now, my hardcase friend—we have grand things to do and grand people to see, so we do, but I keep my word. As for you, you'll stand right where you are for a good fifteen minutes, if you're wise. If I see you start to move, we're all going to ride the handsome. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," Roland said.

"Do you believe me when I say I have nothing to lose?"

"Yes."

"That's wery well, then. Move, boy! Hup!"

Gasher's hold tightened on Jake's throat until he could hardly breathe. At the same time he was pulled backward. They retreated that way, facing the gap where Roland stood with Susannah on his back and Eddie just behind him, still holding the Ruger which Gasher had called a toy pistol. Jake could feel Gasher's breath puffing against his ear in hot little blurts. Worse, he could smell it.

"Don't try a thing," Gasher whispered, "or I'll rip off yer sweetmeats and stuff em up your bung. And it would be sad to lose em before you ever got a chance to use em, wouldn't it? Wery sad indeed."

They reached the end of the bridge. Jake stiffened, believing Gasher would throw the grenade anyway, but he didn't ... at least not immedi-ately. He backed Jake through a narrow alley between two small cubicles which had probably served as tollbooths, once upon a time. Beyond them, the brick warehouses loomed like

prison cellblocks.

"Now, cully, I'm going to let go of your neck, or how would'je ever have wind to run with? But I'll be holdin yer arm, and if ye don't run like the wind, I promise I'll rip it right off and use it for a club to beat you with. Do you understand?"

Jake nodded, and suddenly the terrible, stifling pressure was gone from his windpipe. As soon as it was, he became aware of his hand again—it felt hot and swollen and full of fire. Then Gasher seized his bicep with fingers like bands of iron, and he forgot all about his hand.

"Toodle-doo!" Gasher called in a grotesquely cheery falsetto. He wagged the grenado at the others. "Bye-bye, dears!" Then he growled to Jake: "Now run, you whoring little squint! Run!"

Jake was first whirled and then yanked into a run. The two of them went flying down a curved ramp to street level. Jake's first confused thought was that this was what the East River Drive would look like two or three hundred years after some weird brain-plague had killed all the sane people in the world.

The ancient, rusty hulks of what had once surely been automobiles stood at intervals along both curbs. Most were bubble-shaped roadsters that looked like no cars Jake had ever seen before (except, maybe, for the ones the white-gloved creations of Walt Disney drove in the comic books), but among them he saw an old Volkswagen Beetle, a car that might have been a Chevrolet Corvair, and something he believed was a Model A Ford. There were no tires on any of these eerie hulks; they either had been stolen or had rotted away to dust long since. And all the glass had been broken, as if the remaining denizens of this city abhorred anything which might show them their own reflections, even accidentally. Beneath and between the abandoned cars, the gutters were filled with drifts of unidentifiable metal junk and bright glints of glass. Trees had been planted at intervals along the sidewalks in some long-gone, happier time, but they were now so emphatically dead that they looked like stark metal sculptures against the cloudy sky. Some of the warehouses had either been bombed or had collapsed on their own, and beyond the jumbled heaps of bricks which was all that remained of them Jake could see the river and the rusty, sagging underpinnings of the Send Bridge. That smell of wet decay—a smell that seemed almost to snarl in the nose—was stronger than ever.

The street headed due east, diverging from the path of the Beam, and Jake could see it became more and more choked with rubble and rickrack as it went. Six or seven blocks down it appeared to be entirely plugged, but it was in this direction that Gasher pulled him. At first he kept up, but Gasher was setting a fearsome pace. Jake began to pant and fell a step behind. Gasher almost jerked him off his feet as he dragged Jake toward the barrier of junk and concrete and rusty steel beams which lay ahead. The plug—which looked like a deliberate construction to Jake—lay between two broad buildings with dusty marble facades. In front of the one on the left was a statue Jake recognized at once: it was the woman called Blind Justice, and that almost surely made the building she guarded a courthouse. But he only had a moment to look; Gasher was dragging him relentlessly toward the barricade, and he wasn't slowing down.

He'll kill us if he tries to take us through there! Jake thought, but Gasher—who ran like the wind in spite of the disease which advertised itself on his face—simply buried his fingers deeper in Jake's upper arm and swept him along.

And now Jake saw a narrow alley in the not-quite-haphazard pile of concrete, splintered furniture, rusted plumbing fixtures, and chunks of trucks and automobiles. He suddenly understood. This maze would hold Roland up for hours . . . but it was Gasher's back yard, and he knew exactly where he was going. The small dark opening to the alley was on the left side of the tottery pile of junk. As they reached it, Gasher tossed the green object back over his shoulder. "Better duck, dearie!" he cried, and voiced a series of shrill, hysterical giggles. A moment later a huge, crumping explosion shook the street. One of the bubble-shaped cars jumped twenty feet into the air and then came down on its roof. A hail of bricks whistled over Jake's head, and something thumped him hard on the left shoulder-blade. He stumbled and would have fallen if Gasher hadn't yanked him upright and pulled him into the narrow opening in the rubble. Once they were in the passageway which lay beyond, gloomy shadows reached out eagerly and enfolded them. When they were gone, a small, furry shape crept out from behind a concrete boulder. It was Oy. He stood at the mouth of the passage for a moment, neck stretched forward, eyes gleaming. Then he followed after, nose low to the ground and sniffing carefully.

15

"COME ON," ROLAND SAID as soon as Gasher had turned tail. "How could you do it?" Eddie asked. "How could you let that freak have him?" "Because I had no choice. Bring the wheelchair. We're going to need it." They had reached the concrete on the far side of the gap when an explosion shook the bridge, spraying rubble into the darkening sky. "Christ!" Eddie said, and turned his white, dismayed face to Roland. "Don't worry yet," Roland said calmly. "Fellows like Gasher rarely get careless with their high-explosive toys." They reached the tollbooths at the end of the bridge. Roland stopped just beyond, at the top of the curving ramp. "You knew the guy wasn't just bluffing, didn't you?" Eddie said. "I mean, you weren't guessing—you knew." "He's a walking dead man, and such men don't need to bluff." Roland's voice was calm enough, but there was a deep undertone of bitterness and pain in it. "I knew something like this could happen, and if we'd seen the fellow earlier, while we were still beyond the range of his exploding egg, we could have stood him off. But then Jake fell and he got too close. I imagine he thinks our real reason for bringing a boy in the first place was to pay for safe conduct through the city. Damn! Damn the luck!" Roland struck his fist against his leg. "Well, let's go get him!" Roland shook his head. "This is where we split up. We can't take Susannah where the bastard's gone, and we can't leave her alone." "But—" "Listen and don't argue—not if you want to save Jake. The longer we stand here, the colder his trail gets. Cold trails are hard to follow. You've got your own job to do. If there's another Blaine, and I am sure Jake believes there is, then you and Susannah must find it. There must be a station, or what was once called a cradle in the far lands. Do you understand?" For once, blessedly, Eddie didn't argue. "Yeah. We'll find it. What then?"

"Fire a shot every half hour or so. When I get Jake, I'll come."

"Shots may attract other people as well," Susannah said. Eddie had helped her out of the sling and she was seated in her chair again.

Roland surveyed them coldly. "Handle them."

"Okay." Eddie stuck out his hand and Roland took it briefly. "Find him, Roland."

"Oh, I'll find him. Just pray to your gods that I find him soon enough. And remember the faces of your fathers, both of you."

Susannah nodded. "We'll try."

Roland turned and ran light-footed down the ramp. When he was out of sight, Eddie looked at Susannah and was not very surprised to see she was crying. He felt like crying himself. Half an hour ago they had been a tight little band of friends. Their comfortable fellowship had been smashed to bits in the space of just a few minutes—Jake abducted, Roland gone after him. Even Oy had run away. Eddie had never felt so lonely in his life.

"I have a feeling we're never going to see either of them again," Susannah said.

"Of course we will!" Eddie said roughly, but he knew what she meant, because he felt the same way. The premonition that their quest was all over before it was fairly begun lay heavy on his heart. "In a fight with Attila the Hun, I'd give you three-to-two odds on Roland the Barbar-ian. Come on, Suze—we've got a train to catch."

"But where?" she asked forlornly.

"I don't know. Maybe we should just find the nearest wise old elf and ask him, huh?"

"What are you talking about, Edward Dean?"

"Nothing," he said, and because that was so goddam true he thought he might burst into tears, he grasped the handles of her wheelchair and began to push it down the cracked and glass-littered ramp that led into the city of Lud.

16

JAKE QUICKLY DESCENDED INTO a foggy world where the only landmarks were pain: his throbbing hand, the place on his upper arm where Gasher's fingers dug in like steel pegs, his burning lungs. Before they had gone far, these pains were first joined and then overmatched by a deep, burning stitch in his left side. He wondered if Roland was following after them yet. He also wondered how long Oy would be able to live in this world which was so unlike the plains and forest which were all he had known until now. Then Gasher clouted him across the face, bloodying his nose, and thought was lost in a red wash of pain.

"Come on, yer little bastard! Move yer sweet cheeks!"

"Running ... as fast as I can," Jake gasped, and just managed to dodge a thick shard of glass which jutted like a long transparent tooth from the wall of junk to his left.

"You better not be, because I'll knock yer cold and drag yer along by the hair o' yer head if y'are! Now hup, you little barstard!"

Jake somehow forced himself to run faster. He'd gone into the alley with the idea that they must shortly re-emerge onto the avenue, but he now reluctantly realized that wasn't going to happen. This was more than an alley; it was a camouflaged and fortified road leading ever deeper into the country of the Grays. The tall, tottery walls which pressed in on them had been built from an



exotic array of materials: cars which had been partially or completely flattened by the chunks of granite and steel placed on top of them; marble pillars; unknown factory machines which were dull red with rust wherever they weren't still black with grease; a chrome-and-crystal fish as big as a private plane with one cryptic word of the High Speech—DELIGHT—carefully incised into its scaly gleaming side; crisscrossing chains, each link as big as Jake's head, wrapped around mad

jumbles of furniture that appeared to balance above them as precariously as circus elephants do on their tiny steel platforms.

They came to a place where this lunatic path branched, and Gasher chose the left fork without hesitation. A little further along, three more alleyways, these so narrow they were almost tunnels, spoked off in various directions. This time Gasher chose the right-hand branching. The new path, which seemed to be formed by banks of rotting boxes and huge blocks of old paper—paper that might once have been books or maga-zines—was too narrow for them to run in side by side. Gasher shoved Jake into the lead and began beating him relentlessly on the back to make him go faster. This is how a steer must feel when it's driven down the chute to the slaughtering pen, Jake thought, and vowed that if he got out of this alive, he would never eat steak again.

"Run, my sweet little boycunt! Run!"

Jake soon lost all track of the twistings and turnings they made, and as Gasher drove him deeper and deeper into this jumble of torn steel, broken furniture, and castoff machinery, he began to give up hope of rescue. Not even Roland would be able to find him now. If the gunslinger tried, he would become lost himself, and wander the choked paths of this nightmare world until he died.

Now they were going downhill, and the walls of tightly packed paper had given way to ramparts of filing cabinets, jumbles of adding machines, and piles of computer gear. It was like running through some nightmarish Radio Shack warehouse. For almost a full minute the wall flowing past on Jake's left appeared to be constructed solely of either TV sets or carelessly stacked video display terminals. They stared at him like the glazed eyes of dead men. And as the pavement beneath their feet contin-ued to descend, Jake realized that they were in a tunnel. The strip of cloudy sky overhead narrowed to a band, the band narrowed to a ribbon, and the ribbon became a thread. They were in a gloomy netherworld, scurrying like rats through a gigantic trash-midden.

What if it all comes down on us? Jake wondered, but in his current state of aching exhaustion, this possibility did not frighten him much. If the roof fell in, he would at least be able to rest.

Gasher drove him as a farmer would a mule, striking his left shoulder to indicate a left turn and his right to indicate a right turn. When the course was straight on, he thumped Jake on the back of the head. Jake tried to dodge a jutting pipe and didn't quite succeed. It whacked into one hip and sent him flailing across the narrow passage toward a snarl of glass and jagged boards. Gasher caught him and shoved him forward again. "Run, you clumsy squint! Can't you run? If it wasn't for the Tick-Tock Man, I'd bugger you right here and cut yer throat while I did it, so I would!"

Jake ran in a red daze where there was only pain and the frequent thud of Gasher's fists coming down on his shoulders or the hack of his head. At last, when he was sure he could run no longer, Gasher grabbed him by the neck and

yanked him to a stop so fiercely that Jake crashed into him with a strangled squawk.

"Here's a tricky little bit!" Gasher panted jovially. "Look straight ahead and you'll see two wires what cross in an X low to the ground. Do yer see em?"

At first Jake didn't. It was very gloomy here; heaps of huge copper kettles were piled up to the left, and to the right were stacks of steel tanks that looked like scuba-diving gear. Jake thought he could turn these latter into an avalanche with one strong breath. He swiped his forearm across his eyes, brushing away tangles of hair, and tried not to think about how he'd look with about sixteen tons of those tanks piled on top of him. He squinted in the direction Gasher was pointing. Yes, he could make out—barely—two thin, silvery lines that looked like guitar or banjo strings. They came down from opposite sides of the passageway and crossed about two feet above the pavement.

"Crawl under, dear heart. And be ever so careful, for if you so much as twang one of those wires, harf the steel and cement puke in the city'll come down on your dear little head. Mine, too, although I doubt if that'd disturb you much, would it? Now crawl!"

Jake shrugged out of his pack, lay down, and pushed it through the gap ahead of him. And as he eased his way under the thin, taut wires, he discovered that he wanted to live a little longer after all. It seemed that he could actually feel all those tons of carefully balanced junk waiting to come down on him. These wires are probably holding a couple of carefully chosen keystones in place, he thought. If one of them breaks . . . ashes, ashes, we all fall down. His back brushed one of the wires, and high overhead, something creaked.

"Careful, cully!" Gasher almost moaned. "Be oh so careful!"

Jake pushed himself beneath the crisscrossing wires, using his feet and his elbows. His stinking, sweat-clogged hair fell in his eyes again, but he did not dare brush it away.

"You're clear," Gasher grunted at last, and slipped beneath the tripwires himself with the ease of long practice. He stood up and snatched Jake's pack before Jake could reshoulder it. "What's in here, cully?" he asked, undoing the straps and peering in. "Got any treats for yer old pal? For the Gasherman loves his treaties, so he does!"

"There's nothing in there but—"

Gasher's hand flashed out and rocked Jake's head back with a hard slap that sent a fresh spray of bloody froth flying from the boy's nose.

"What did you do that for?" Jake cried, hurt and outraged.

"For tellin me what my own beshitted eyes can see!" Gasher yelled, and cast Jake's pack aside. He bared his remaining teeth at the boy in a dangerous, terrible grin. "And fer almost bringin the whole beshitted works down on us!" He paused, then added in a quieter voice: "And because I felt like it—I must admit that. Your stupid sheep's face puts me wery much in a slappin temper, so it does." The grin widened, reveal-ing his oozing whitish gums, a sight Jake could have done without. "If your hardcase friend follows us this far, he'll have a surprise when he runs into those wires, won't he?" Gasher looked up, still grinning. "There's a city bus balanced up there someplace, as I remember."

Jake began to weep—tired, hopeless tears that cut through the dirt on his cheeks in narrow channels.

Gasher raised an open, threatening hand. "Get moving, cully, before I start

cryin myself ... for a wery sentermental fellow is yer old pal, so he is, and when he starts to grieve and mourn, a little slappin is the only thing to put a smile on his face again. Run!"

They ran. Gasher chose pathways leading deeper into the smelly, creaking maze seemingly at random, indicating his choices with hard whacks to the shoulders. At some point the sound of the drums began. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, and for Jake it was the final straw. He gave up hope and thought alike, and allowed himself to descend wholly into the nightmare.

17

ROLAND HALTED IN FRONT of the barricade which choked the street from side to side and top to bottom. Unlike Jake, he had no hopes of emerging into the open on the other side. The buildings lying east of this point would be sentry-occupied islands emerging from an inland sea of trash, tools, artifacts . . . and booby-traps, he had no doubt. Some of these leavings undoubtedly still remained where they had fallen five hundred or seven hundred or a thousand years ago, but Roland thought most of it had been dragged here by the Grays a piece at a time. The eastern portion of Lud had become, in effect, the castle of the Grays, and Roland was now standing outside its wall.

He walked forward slowly and saw the mouth of a passageway half-hidden behind a ragged cement boulder. There were footprints in the powdery dust—two sets, one big, one small. Roland started to get up, looked again, and squatted on his hunkers once more. Not two sets but three, the third marking the paws of a small animal.

"Oy?" Roland called softly. For a moment there was no response, and then a single soft bark came from the shadows. Roland stepped into the passageway and saw gold-ringed eyes peering at him from around the first crooked corner. Roland trotted down to the humbler. Oy, who still didn't like to come really close to anyone but Jake, backed up a step and then held his ground, looking anxiously up at the gunslinger.

"Do you want to help me?" Roland asked. He could feel the dry red curtain that was battle fever at the edge of his consciousness, but this was not the time for it. The time would come, but for now he must not allow himself that inexpressible relief. "Help me find Jake?"

"Ake!" Oy barked, still watching Roland with his anxious eyes.

"Go on, then. Find him."

Oy turned away at once and ran rapidly down the alley, nose skim-ming the ground. Roland followed, his eyes only occasionally flicking up to glance at Oy. Mostly he kept his gaze fixed on the ancient pavement, looking for sign.

18

"JESUS," EDDIE SAID. "WHAT land of people are these guys?"

They had followed the avenue at the base of the ramp for a couple of blocks, had seen the barricade (missing Roland's entry into the partially hidden passageway by less than a minute) which lay ahead, and had turned north onto a broad thoroughfare which reminded Eddie of Fifth Avenue. He hadn't dared to tell Susannah that; he was still too bitterly disappointed with this stinking,

littered ruin of a city to articulate anything hopeful.

"Fifth Avenue" led them into an area of large white stone buildings that reminded Eddie of the way Rome looked in the gladiator movies he'd watched on TV as a kid. They were austere and, for the most part, still in good shape. He was pretty sure they had been public buildings of some sort—galleries, libraries, maybe museums. One, with a big domed roof that had cracked like a granite egg, might have been an observatory, although Eddie had read someplace that astronomers liked to be away from big cities, because all the electric lights fucked up their star-gazing.

There were open areas between these imposing edifices, and although the grass and flowers which had once grown there had been choked off by weeds and tangles of underbrush, the area still had a stately feel, and Eddie wondered if it had once been the center of Lud's cultural life. Those days were long gone, of course; Eddie doubted if Gasher and his pals were very interested in ballet or chamber music.

He and Susannah had come to a major intersection from which four more broad avenues radiated outward like spokes on a wheel. At the hub of the wheel was a large paved square. Ringing it were loudspeakers on forty-foot steel posts. In the center of the square was a pedestal with the remains of a statue upon it—a mighty copper war-horse, green with verdigris, pawing its forelegs at the air. The warrior who had once ridden this charger lay off to the side on one corroded shoulder, waving what looked like a machine-gun in one hand and a sword in the other. His legs were still bowed around the shape of the horse he had once ridden, but his boots remained welded to the sides of his metal mount. GRAYS DIE! was written across the pedestal in fading orange letters.

Glancing down the radiating streets, Eddie saw more of the speaker-poles. A few had fallen over, but most still stood, and each of these had been festooned with a grisly garland of corpses. As a result, the square into which "Fifth Avenue" emptied and the streets which led away were guarded by a small army of the dead.

"What kind of people are they?" Eddie asked again.

He didn't expect an answer and Susannah didn't give one . . . but she could have. She'd had insights into the past of Roland's world before, but never one as clear and sure as this. All of her earlier insights, like those which had come to her in River Crossing, had had a haunting visionary quality, like dreams, but what came now arrived in a single flash, and it was like seeing the twisted face of a dangerous maniac illuminated by a stroke of lightning.

The speakers . . . the hanging bodies . . . the drums. She suddenly understood how they went together as clearly as she had understood that the heavy-laden wagons passing through River Crossing on their way to Jimtown had been pulled by oxen rather than mules or horses.

"Never mind this trash," she said, and her voice only quivered a little. "It's the train we want—which way is it, d'you think?"

Eddie glanced up at the darkening sky and easily picked out the path of the Beam in the rushing clouds. He looked back down and wasn't much surprised to see that the entrance to the street corresponding most closely to the path of the Beam was guarded by a large stone turtle. Its reptilian head peered out from beneath the granite lip of its shell; its deepset eyes seemed to stare curiously at them. Eddie nodded toward it and managed a small dry smile. "See the turtle of enormous girth?"

Susannah took a brief look of her own and nodded. He pushed her across the city square and into The Street of the Turtle. The corpses which lined it gave off a dry, cinnamony smell that made Eddie's stomach clench . . . not because it was bad but because it was actually rather pleasant—the sugar-spicy aroma of something a kid would enjoy shaking onto his morning toast.

The Street of the Turtle was mercifully broad, and most of the corpses hanging from the speaker-poles were little more than mummies, but Susannah saw a few which were relatively fresh, with flies still crawl-ing busily across the blackening skin of their swollen faces and maggots still squirming out of their decaying eyes.

And below each speaker was a little drift of bones.

"There must be thousands," Eddie said. "Men, women, and kids."

"Yes." Susannah's calm voice sounded distant and strange to her own ears.

"They've had a lot of time to kill. And they've used it to kill each other."

"Bring on those wise fuckin elves!" Eddie said, and the laugh that followed sounded suspiciously like a sob. He thought he was at last begin-ning to fully understand what that innocuous phrase—the world has moved on—really meant. What a breadth of ignorance and evil it covered.

And what a depth.

The speakers were a wartime measure, Susannah thought. Of course they were. God only knows which war, or how long ago, but it must have been a doozy. The rulers of Lud used the speakers to make city-wide announcements from some central, bomb-proof location—a bunker like the one Hitler and his high command retreated to at the end of World War II.

And in her ears she could hear the voice of authority which had come rolling out of those speakers—could hear it as clearly as she had heard the creak of the wagons passing through River Crossing, as clearly as she had heard the crack of the whip above the backs of the straining oxen.

Ration centers A and D will be closed today; please proceed to cen-ters B, C, E, and F with proper coupons.

Militia squads Nine, Ten, and Twelve report to Sendside.

Aerial bombardment is likely between the hours of eight and ten of the clock.

All noncombatant residents should report to their designated shelters. Bring your gas masks. Repeat, bring your gas masks.

Announcements, yes . . . and some garbled version of the news—a propagandized, militant version George Orwell would have called double-speak. And in between the news bulletins and the announcements, squall-ing military music and exhortations to respect the fallen by sending more men and women into the red throat of the abattoir.

Then the war had ended and silence had fallen ... for a while. But at some point, the speakers had begun broadcasting again. How long ago? A hundred years? Fifty? Did it matter? Susannah thought not. What mattered was that when the speakers were reactivated, the only thing they broadcast was a single tape-loop . . . the loop with the drum-track on it. And the descendents of the city's original residents had taken it for ... what? The Voice of the Turtle? The Will of the Beam?

Susannah found herself remembering the time she had asked her father, a quiet hut deeply cynical man, if he believed there was a God in heaven who guided the course of human events. Well, he had said, I think it's sort of half 'n half,

Odetta. I'm sure there's a God, but I don't think He has much if anything to do with us these days; I believe that after we killed His son, He finally got it through His head that there wasn't nothing to be done with the sons of Adam or the daughters of Eve, and He washed His hands of us. Wise fella.

She had responded to this (which she had fully expected; she was eleven at the time, and knew the turn of her father's mind quite well) by showing him a squib on the Community Churches page of the local newspaper. It said that Rev. Murdock of the Grace Methodist Church would that Sunday elucidate on the topic "God Speaks to Each of Us Every Day"—with a text from First Corinthians. Her father had laughed over that so hard that tears had squirted from the corners of his eyes. Well, I guess each of us hears someone talking, he had said at last, and you can bet your bottom dollar on one thing, sweetie: each of us—including this here Reverend Murdock—hears that voice say just exactly what he wants to hear. It's so convenient that way.

What these people had apparently wanted to hear in the recorded drum-track was an invitation to commit ritual murder. And now, when the drums began to throb through these hundreds or thousands of speak-ers—a hammering back-beat which was only the percussion to a Z.Z. Top song called "Velcro Fly," if Eddie was right—it became their signal to unlimber the hangropes and run a few folks up the nearest speaker-posts.

How many? she wondered as Eddie rolled her along in her wheel-chair, its nicked and dented hard rubber tires crackling over broken glass and whispering through drifts of discarded paper. How many have been killed over the years because some electronic circuit under the city got the hiccups? Did it start because they recognized the essential alienness of the music, which came somehow—like us, and the airplane, and some of the cars along these streets—from another world? She didn't know, but she knew she had come around to her father's cynical point of view on the subject of God and the chats He might or might not have with the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve. These people had been looking for a reason to slaughter each other, that was all, and the drums had been as good a reason as any.

She found herself thinking of the hive they had found—the mis-shapen hive of white bees whose honey would have poisoned them if they had been foolish enough to eat of it. Here, on this side of the Send, was another dying hive; more mutated white bees whose sting would be no less deadly for their confusion, loss, and perplexity.

And how many more will have to die before the tape finally breaks?

As if her thoughts had caused it to happen, the speakers suddenly began to transmit the relentless, syncopated heartbeat of the drums. Eddie yelled in surprise. Susannah screamed and clapped both hands to her ears—but before she did, she could faintly hear the rest of the music: the track or tracks which had been muted decades ago when someone (probably quite by accident) had bumped the balance control, knocking it all the way to one side and burying both the guitars and the vocal.

Eddie continued to push her along The Street of the Turtle and the Path of the Beam, trying to look in all directions at once and trying not to smell the odor of putrefaction. Thank God for the wind, he thought.

He began to push the wheelchair faster, scanning the weedy gaps between the big white buildings for the graceful sweep of an overhead monorail track. He wanted

to get out of this endless aisle of the dead. As he took yet another deep breath of that speciously sweet cinnamon smell, it seemed to him that he had never wanted anything so badly in his whole life.

19

JAKE'S DAZE WAS BROKEN abruptly when Gasher grabbed him by the collar and yanked with all the force of a cruel rider braking a galloping horse. He stuck one leg out at the same time and Jake went crashing backward over it. His head connected with the pavement and for a moment all the lights went out. Gasher, no humanitarian, brought him around quickly by seizing Jake's lower lip and yanking it upward and outward.

Jake screamed and bolted to a sitting position, striking out blindly with his fists. Gasher dodged the blows easily, hooked his other hand into Jake's armpit, and yanked him to his feet. Jake stood there, rocking drunkenly back and forth. He was beyond protest now; almost beyond understanding. All he knew for sure was that every muscle in his body felt sprung and his wounded hand was howling like an animal caught in a trap.

Gasher apparently needed a breather, and this time he was slower getting his wind back. He stood bent over with his hands planted on the knees of his green trousers, panting in fast little whistling breaths. His yellow headscarf had slipped askew. His good eye glittered like a trum-pery diamond. The white silk eyepatch was now wrinkled, and curds of evil-looking yellow muck oozed onto his cheek from beneath it.

"Take a look over your head, cully, and you'll see why I brung you up short. Get an eyeful!"

Jake tilted his head upward, and in the depths of his shock he was not at all surprised to see a marble fountain as big as a house-trailer dangling eighty feet above them. He and Gasher were almost below it. The fountain was held suspended by two rusty cables which were mostly hidden within huge, unsteady stacks of church pews. Even in his less-than-acute state, Jake saw that these cables were more seriously frayed than the remaining hangers on the bridge had been.

"See it?" Gasher asked, grinning. He raised his left hand to his covered eye, scooped a mass of the pussy material from beneath it, and flicked it indifferently aside. "Beauty, ain't it? Oh, the Tick-Tock Man's a trig cove, all right, and no mistake. (Where's those goat-fucking drums? They should have started by now—if Copperhead's forgot em, I'll ram a stick so far up his arse he'll taste bark.) Now look ahead of you, my delicious little squint."

Jake did, and Gasher immediately clouted him so hard that he stag-gered backward and almost fell.

"Not across, idiot child! Down! See them two dark cobblestones?"

After a moment, Jake did. He nodded apathetically.

"Yer don't wanter step on em, for that'd bring the whole works down on your head, cully, and anybody who wanted yer after that'd have to pick yer up with a blotter. Understand?"

Jake nodded again.

"Good." Gasher took a final deep breath and slapped Jake's shoulder. "Go on, then, whatcher waitin for? Hup!"

Jake stepped over the first of the discolored stones and saw it wasn't really a cobblestone at all but a metal plate which had been rounded to look like one. The second was just ahead of it, cunningly placed so that if an unaware intruder happened to miss the first one, he or she would almost certainly step on the second.

Go ahead and do it, then, he thought. Why not? The gunslinger's never going to find you in this maze, so go ahead and bring it down. It's got to be cleaner than what Gasher and his friends have got planned for you. Quicker, too. His dusty moccasin wavered in the air above the booby-trap.

Gasher hit him with a fist in the middle of the back, but not hard. "Thinkin about takin a ride on the handsome, are you, my little cull?" he asked. The laughing cruelty in his voice had been replaced by simple curiosity. If it was tinged with any other emotion, it wasn't fear but amusement. "Well, go ahead, if it's what yer mean to do, for I have my ticket already. Only be quick about it, gods blast your eyes."

Jake's foot came down beyond the trigger of the booby-trap. His decision to live a little longer was not based on any hope that Roland would find him; it was just that this was what Roland would do—go on until someone made him stop, and then a few yards farther still if he could.

If he did it now, he could take Gasher with him, but Gasher alone wasn't sufficient—one look was enough to make it clear that he was telling the truth when he said he was dying already. If he went on, he might have a chance to take some of the Gasherman's friends, too— maybe even the one he called the Tick-Tock Man.

If I'm going to ride what he calls the handsome, Jake thought, I'd just as soon go with plenty of company.

Roland would have understood.

20

JAKE WAS WRONG IN his assessment of the gunslinger's ability to follow their path through the maze; Jake's pack was only the most obvious bit of sign they left behind them, but Roland quickly realized he did not have to pause to look for sign. He only had to follow Oy.

He paused at several intersecting passages nevertheless, wanting to make sure, and each time he did, Oy looked back and uttered his low, impatient bark that seemed to say, Hurry up! Do you want to lose them? After the signs he saw—a track, a thread from Jake's shirt, a scrap of bright yellow cloth from Gasher's scarf—had three times confirmed the bumbler's choices, Roland simply followed Oy. He did not give up look-ing for sign, but he quit making stops to hunt for it. Then the drums started up, and it was the drums—plus Gasher's nosiness about what Jake might be carrying—that saved Roland's life that afternoon.

He skidded to a halt in his dusty boots, and his gun was in his hand before he realized what the sound was. When he did realize, he dropped the revolver back into its holster with an impatient grunt. He was about to go on again when his eye happened first on Jake's pack . . . and then on a pair of faint, gleaming streaks in midair just to the left of it. Roland narrowed his eyes and made out



two thin wires which crisscrossed at knee level not three feet in front of him. Oy, who was built low to the ground, had scurried neatly through the inverted V formed by the wires, but if not for the drums and spotting Jake's castoff pack, Roland would have run right into them. As his eyes moved upward, tracing the not-quite-random piles of junk poised on either side of the passageway at this point, Roland's mouth tightened. It had been a close call, and only ka had saved him.

Oy barked impatiently.

Roland dropped to his belly and crawled beneath the wires, moving slowly and carefully—he was bigger than either Jake or Gasher, and he realized a really big man wouldn't be able to get under here at all without triggering the carefully prepared avalanche. The drums pumped and thumped in his ears. I wonder if they've all gone mad, he thought. If I had to listen to that every day, I think I would have.

He got to the far side of the wires, picked up the pack, and looked inside. Jake's books and a few items of clothing were still in there, so were the treasures he had picked up along the way—a rock which gleamed with yellow flecks that looked like gold but weren't; an arrow-head, probably the leaving of the old forest folk, which Jake had found in a grove of trees the day after his drawing; some coins from his own world; his father's sunglasses; a few other things which only a boy not yet in his teens could really love and understand. Things he would want back again ... if, that was, Roland got to him before Gasher and his friends could change him, hurt him in ways that would cause him to lose interest in the innocent pursuits and curiosities of pre-adolescent boyhood.

Gasher's grinning face swam into Roland's mind like the face of a demon or a djinni from a bottle: the snaggle teeth, the vacant eyes, the mandrus crawling over the cheeks and spreading beneath the stubbly lines of the jaws. If you hurt him ... he thought, and then forced his mind away, because that line of thought was a blind alley. If Gasher hurt the boy (Jake! his mind insisted fiercely—Not just the boy but Jake! Jake!), Roland would kill him, yes. But the act would mean nothing, for Gasher was a dead man already.

The gunslinger lengthened the straps of the pack, marvelling at the clever buckles which made this possible, slipped it onto his own back, and stood up again. Oy turned to be off, but Roland called his name and the bumbler looked back.

"To me, Oy." Roland didn't know if the bumbler could understand (or if he would obey even if he did), but it would be better—safer—if he stayed close. Where there was one booby-trap, there were apt to be more. Next time Oy might not be so lucky.

"Ake!" Oy barked, not moving. The bark was assertive, but Roland thought he saw more of the truth about how Oy felt in his eyes: they were dark with fear.

"Yes, but it's dangerous," Roland said. "To me, Oy."

Back the way they had come, there was a thud as something heavy fell, probably dislodged by the punishing vibration of the drums. Roland could now see speaker-poles here and there, poking out of the wreckage like strange long-necked animals.

Oy trotted back to him and looked up, panting.

"Stay close."

"Ake! Ake-Ake!"

"Yes. Jake." He began to run again, and Oy ran beside him, heeling as neatly as any dog Roland had ever seen.

21

FOR EDDIE, IT WAS, as some wise man had once said, *deja vu* all over again: he was running with the wheelchair, racing time. The beach had been replaced by The Street of the Turtle, but somehow everything else was the same. Oh, there was one other relevant difference: now it was a railway station (or a cradle) he was looking for, not a free-standing door.

Susannah was sitting bolt upright with her hair blowing out behind her and Roland's revolver in her right hand, its barrel pointed up at the cloudy, troubled sky. The drums thudded and pounded, bludgeoning them with sound. A gigantic, dish-shaped object lay in the street just ahead, and Eddie's overstrained mind, perhaps cued by the classical buildings on either side of them, produced an image of Jove and Thor playing Frisbee. Jove throws one wide and Thor lets it fall through a cloud—what the hell, it's Miller Time on Olympus, anyway.

Frisbees of the gods, he thought, swerving Susannah between two crumbling, rusty cars, what a concept.

He bumped the chair up on the sidewalk to get around the artifact, which looked like some sort of telecommunications dish now that he was really close to it. He was easing the wheelchair over the curb and back into the street again—the sidewalk was too littered with crap to make any real time—when the drums suddenly cut out. The echoes rolled away into a new silence, except it wasn't really silent at all, Eddie realized. Up ahead, the arched entrance to a marble building stood at the intersection of The Street of the Turtle and another avenue. This building had been overgrown by vines and some straggly green stuff that looked like cypress beards, but it was still magnificent and somehow dignified. Beyond it, around the corner, a crowd was babbling excitedly.

"Don't stop!" Susannah snapped. "We haven't got time to—"

A hysterical shriek drilled through the babble. It was accompanied by yells of approval, and, incredibly, the sort of applause Eddie had heard in Atlantic City hotel-casinos after some lounge act had finished doing its thing. The shriek was choked into a long, dying gargle that sounded like the buzz of a cicada. Eddie felt the hair on the nape of his neck coming to attention. He glanced at the corpses hanging from the nearest speaker-pole and understood that the fun-loving Pubes of Lud were hold-ing another public execution.

Marvellous, he thought. Now if they only had Tony Orlando and Dawn to sing "Knock Three Times," they could all die happy.

Eddie looked curiously at the stone pile on the corner. This close, the vines which overgrew it had a powerful herbal smell. That smell was eye-wateringly bitter, but he still liked it better than the cinnamon-sweet odor of the mummified corpses. The beards of greenery growing from the vines drooped in ratty sheaves, creating waterfalls of vegetation where once there had been a series of arched entrances. A figure suddenly barrelled out through one of these waterfalls and hurried toward them. It was a kid, Eddie realized, and not that many years out of diapers, judging by the size. He was wearing a weird little

Lord Fauntleroy outfit, complete with ruffled white shirt and velveteen short pants. There were ribbons in his hair. Eddie felt a sudden mad urge to wave his hands above his head and scream But-wheat say, "Lud is o-tay!"

"Come on!" the kid cried in a high, piping voice. Several sprays of the green stuff had gotten caught in his hair; he brushed absently at these with his left hand as he ran. "They're gonna do Spankers! It's the Spankerman's turn to go to the land of the drums! Come on or you'll miss the whole fakement, gods cuss it!"

Susannah was equally stunned by the child's appearance, but as he got closer, it struck her that there was something extremely odd and awkward about the way he was brushing at the crumbles and strands of greenery which had gotten caught in his beribboned hair: he kept using just that one hand. His other had been behind his back when he ran out through the weedy waterfall, and there it remained. How awkward that must be! she thought, and then a tape-player turned on in her mind and she heard Roland speaking at the end of the bridge. I knew something like this could happen . . . if we'd seen the fellow earlier, while we were still beyond the range of his exploding egg . . . Damn the luck!

She levelled Roland's gun at the child, who had leaped from the curb and was running straight for them. "Hold it!" she screamed. "Stand still, you!"

"Suze, what are you doing?" Eddie yelled.

Susannah ignored him. In a very real sense, Susannah Dean was no longer even here; it was Detta Walker in the chair now, and her eyes were glittering with feverish suspicion. "Stop or I'll shoot!"

Little Lord Fauntleroy might have been deaf for all the effect her warning had. "Hoss it!" he shouted jubilantly. "Yer gointer miss the whole show! Spanker's gointer—"

His right hand finally began to come out from behind his back. As it did, Eddie realized they weren't looking at a kid but at a misshapen dwarf whose childhood was many years past. The expression Eddie had at first taken for childish glee was actually a chilly mixture of hate and rage. The dwarf's cheeks and brow were covered with the oozing, discol-ored patches Roland called whore's blossoms. Susannah never saw his face. Her attention was fixed on the emerg-ing right hand, and the dull green sphere it held. That was all she needed to see.

Roland's gun crashed. The dwarf was hammered backward. A shrill cry of pain and rage rose from his tiny mouth as he landed on the sidewalk. The grenade bounced out of his hand and rolled back into the same arch through which he had emerged. Detta was gone like a dream, and Susannah looked from the smoking gun to the tiny, sprawled figure on the sidewalk with surprise, horror, and dismay. "Oh, my Jesus! I shot him! Eddie, I shot him!"

"Grays . . . die!"

Little Lord Fauntleroy tried to scream these words defiantly, but they came out in a bubbling choke of blood that drenched the few remaining white patches on his frilly shirt. There was a muffled explosion from inside the overgrown plaza of the corner building, and the shaggy carpets of green stuff hanging in front of the arches billowed outward like flags in a brisk gale. With them came clouds of choking, acrid smoke. Eddie flung himself on top of Susannah to shield her, and felt a gritty shower of concrete fragments—all small ones, luckily—patter down on his back, his neck, and the crown of his head. There was a series of unpleasantly wet smacking sounds to his left. He opened his eyes a crack, looked in that direction, and saw Little Lord Fauntleroy's head just com-ing to a stop

in the gutter. The dwarf's eyes were still open, his mouth still fixed in its final snarl.

Now there were other voices, some shrieking, some yelling, all furious. Eddie rolled off Susannah's chair—it tottered on one wheel before deciding to stay up—and stared in the direction from which the dwarf had come. A ragged mob of about twenty men and women had appeared, some coming from around the corner, others pushing through the mats of foliage which obscured the corner building's arches, materializing from the smoke of the dwarf's grenade like evil spirits. Most were wearing blue headscarves and all were carrying weapons—a varied (and somehow pitiful) assortment of them which included rusty swords, dull knives, and splintery clubs. Eddie saw one man defiantly waving a hammer. Pubes, Eddie thought. We interrupted their necktie party, and they're pissed as hell about it.

A tangle of shouts—Kill the Grays! Kill them both! They've done for Luster, God kill their eyes!—arose from this charming group as they caught sight of Susannah in her wheelchair and Eddie, who was now crouched on one knee before it. The man in the forefront was wearing a kilt-like wrap and waving a cutlass. He brandished this wildly (he would have decapitated the heavyset woman standing close behind him, had she not ducked) and then charged. The others followed, yelling happily.

Roland's gun pounded its bright thunder into the windy, overcast day, and the top of the kilt-wearing Pube's head lifted off. The sallow skin of the woman who had almost been decapitated by his cutlass was suddenly stippled with red rain and she voiced a sound of barking dismay. The others came on past the woman and the dead man, raving and wild-eyed.

"Eddie!" Susannah screamed, and fired again. A man wearing a silk-lined cape and knee-boots collapsed into the street.

Eddie groped for the Ruger and had one panicky moment when he thought he had lost it. The butt of the gun had somehow slipped down inside the waistband of his pants. He wrapped his hand around it and yanked hard. The fucking thing wouldn't come. The sight at the end of the barrel had somehow gotten stuck in his underwear.

Susannah fired three closely spaced shots. Each found a target, but the oncoming Pubes didn't slow.

"Eddie, help me!"

Eddie tore his pants open, feeling like some cut-rate version of Superman, and finally managed to free the Ruger. He hit the safety with the heel of his left palm, placed his elbow on his leg just above the knee, and began to fire. There was no need to think—no need to even aim. Roland had told them that in battle a gunslinger's hands worked on their own, and Eddie now discovered it was true. It would have been hard for a blind man to miss at this range, anyway. Susannah had cut the numbers of the charging Pubes to no more than fifteen; Eddie went through the remainder like a storm wind in a wheatfield, dropping four in less than two seconds.

Now the single face of the mob, that look of glazed and mindless eagerness, began to break apart. The man with the hammer abruptly tossed his weapon aside and ran for it, limping extravagantly on a pair of arthritis-twisted legs. He was followed by two others. The rest of them milled uncertainly in the street.

"Come on, you deucies!" a relatively young man snarled. He wore his blue scarf

around his throat like a rally-racer's ascot. He was bald except for two fluffs of frizzy red hair, one on each side of his head. To Susannah, this fellow looked like Clarabell the Clown; to Eddie he looked like Ronald McDonald; to both of them he looked like trouble. He threw a home-made spear that might have started life as a steel tableleg. It clattered harmlessly into the street to Eddie and Susannah's right. "Come on, I say! We can get em if we all stick togeth—"

"Sorry, guy," Eddie murmured, and shot him in the chest.

Clarabell/Ronald staggered backward, one hand going to his shirt.

He stared at Eddie with huge eyes that told his tale with heartbreaking clarity: this wasn't supposed to happen. The hand dropped heavily to the young man's side. A single runlet of blood, incredibly bright in the gray day, slipped from the corner of his mouth. The few remaining Pubes stared at him mutely as he slipped to his knees, and one of them turned to run.

"Not at all," Eddie said. "Stay put, my retarded friend, or you're going to get a good look at the clearing where your path ends." He raised his voice. "Drop em, boys and girls! All of em! Now!"

"You ..." the dying man whispered. "You . . . gunslinger?"

"That's right," Eddie said. His eyes surveyed the remaining Pubes grimly.

"Cry your . . . pardon," the man with the frizzy red hair gasped, and then he fell forward onto his face.

"Gunslingers?" one of the others asked. His tone was one of dawning horror and realization.

"Well, you're stupid, but you ain't deaf," Susannah said, "and that's somethin, anyway." She wagged the barrel of the gun, which Eddie was quite sure was empty. For that matter, how many rounds could be left in the Ruger? He realized he didn't have any idea how many rounds the clip held, and cursed himself for a fool . . . but had he really believed it could come to something like this? He didn't think so. "You heard him, folks. Drop em. Recess is over."

One by one, they complied. The woman who was wearing a pint or so of Mr. Sword-and-Kilt's blood on her face said, "You shouldn't've killed Winston, missus—'twas his birthday, so it was."

"Well, I guess he should have stayed home and eaten some more birthday cake," Eddie said. Given the overall quality of this experience, he didn't find either the woman's comment or his own response at all surreal.

There was one other woman among the remaining Pubes, a scrawny thing whose long blonde hair was coming out in big patches, as if she had the mange. Eddie observed her sidling toward the dead dwarf—and the potential safety of the overgrown arches beyond him—and put a bullet into the cracked cement close by her foot. He had no idea what he wanted with her, but what he didn't want was one of them giving the rest of them ideas. For one thing, he was afraid of what his hands might do if the sickly, sullen people before him tried to run. Whatever his head thought about this gunslinging business, his hands had discovered they liked it just fine.

"Stand where you are, beautiful. Officer Friendly says play it safe." He glanced at Susannah and was disturbed by the grayish quality of her complexion. "Suze, you all right?" he asked in a lower voice.

"Yes."

"You're not going to faint or anything, are you? Because—"

"No." She looked at him with eyes so dark they were like caves. "It's just that I never shot anyone before . . . okay?"

Well, you better get used to it rose to his lips. He bit it back and returned his gaze to the five people who remained before them. They were looking at him and Susannah with a species of sullen fear which nevertheless stopped well short of terror.

Shit, most of them have forgotten what terror is, he thought. Joy, sadness, love . . . same thing. I don't think they feel much of anything, anymore. They've been living in this purgatory too long.

Then he remembered the laughter, the excited cries, the lounge-act applause, and revised his thinking. There was at least one thing that still got their motors running, one thing that still pushed their buttons. Spanker could have testified to that.

"Who's in charge here?" Eddie asked. He was watching the intersection behind the little group very carefully in case the others should get their courage back. So far he saw and heard nothing alarming from that direction. He thought that the others had probably left this ragged crew to its fate.

They looked at each other uncertainly, and finally the woman with the blood-spattered face spoke up. "Spanker was, but when the god-drums started up this time, it was Spanker's stone what come out of the hat and we set him to dance. I guess Winston would have come next, but you did for him with your god-rotted guns, so you did." She wiped blood deliberately from her cheek, looked at it, and then returned her sullen glance to Eddie.

"Well, what do you think Winston was trying to do to me with his god-rotted spear?" Eddie asked. He was disgusted to find the woman had actually made him feel guilty about what he had done. "Trim my sideburns?"

"Killed Frank 'n Luster, too," she went on doggedly, "and what are you? Either Grays, which is bad, or a couple of god-rotted outlanders, which is worse. Who's left for the Pubes in City North? Topsy, I suppose—Topsy the Sailor—but he ain't here, is he? Took his boat and went off downriver, ay, so he did, and god rot him, too, says I!"

Susannah had ceased listening; her mind had fixed with horrified fascination on something the woman had said earlier. It was Spanker's stone what come out of the hat and we set him to dance. She remembered reading Shirley Jackson's story "The Lottery" in college and understood that these people, the degenerate descendents of the original Pubes, were living Jackson's nightmare. No wonder they weren't capable of any strong emotion when they knew they would have to participate in such a grisly drawing not once a year, as in the story, but two or three times each day.

"Why?" she asked the bloody woman in a harsh, horrified voice. "Why do you do it?"

The woman looked at Susannah as if she was the world's biggest fool. "Why? So the ghosts what live in the machines won't take over the bodies of those who have died here—Pubes and Grays alike—and send them up through the holes in the streets to eat us. Any fool knows that."

"There are no such things as ghosts," Susannah said, and her voice sounded like so much meaningless quacking to her own ears. Of course there were. In this world, there were ghosts everywhere. Nevertheless, she pushed ahead. "What you call the god-drums is only a tape stuck in a machine. That's really all it is."

Sudden inspiration struck her and she added: "Or maybe the Grays are doing it on purpose—did you ever think of that? They live in the other part of the city, don't they? And under it, as well? They've always wanted you out. Maybe they've just hit on a really efficient way of getting you guys to do their work for them."

The bloody woman was standing next to an elderly gent wearing what looked like the world's oldest bowler hat and a pair of frayed khaki shorts. Now he stepped forward and spoke to her with a patina of good manners that turned his underlying contempt into a dagger with razor-sharp edges. "You are quite wrong, Madam Gunslinger. There are a great many machines under Lud, and there are ghosts in all of them—demonous spirits which bear only ill will to mortal men and women. These demon-ghosts are very capable of raising the dead . . . and in Lud, there are a great many dead to raise."

"Listen," Eddie said. "Have you ever seen one of these zombies with your own eyes, Jeeves? Have any of you?"

Jeeves curled his lip and said nothing—but that lip-curl really said it all.

What else could one expect, it asked, from outlanders who used guns as a substitute for understanding?

Eddie decided it would be best to close off the whole line of discussion. He had never been cut out for missionary work, anyway. He wag-gled the Ruger at the bloodstained woman. "You and your friend there—the one who looks like an English butler on his day off—are going to take us to the railroad station. After that, we can all say goodbye, and I'll tell you the truth: that's going to make my fuckin day."

"Railroad station?" the guy who looked like Jeeves the Butler asked. "What is a railroad station?"

"Take us to the cradle," Susannah said. "Take us to Blaine."

This finally rattled Jeeves; an expression of shocked horror replaced the world-weary contempt with which he had thus far treated them. "You can't go there!" he cried. "The cradle is forbidden ground, and Blaine is the most dangerous of all Lud's ghosts!"

Forbidden ground? Eddie thought. Great. If it's the truth, at least we'll be able to stop worrying about you assholes. It was also nice to hear that there still was a Blaine ... or that these people thought there was, anyway.

The others were staring at Eddie and Susannah with expressions of uncomprehending amazement; it was as if the interlopers had suggested to a bunch of born-again Christians that they hunt up the Ark of the Covenant and turn it into a pay toilet.

Eddie raised the Ruger until the center of Jeeves's forehead lay in the sight.

"We're going," he said, "and if you don't want to join your ancestors right here and now, I suggest you stop pissing and moaning and take us there."

Jeeves and the bloodstained woman exchanged an uncertain glance, but when the man in the bowler hat looked back at Eddie and Susannah, his face was firm and set. "Shoot us if you like," he said. "We'd sooner die here than there."

"You folks are a bunch of sick motherfuckers with dying on the brain!" Susannah cried at them. "Nobody has to die! Just take us where we want to go, for the love of God!"

The woman said somberly, "But it is death to enter Blaine's cradle, mum, so it is. For Blaine sleeps, and he who disturbs his rest must pay a high price."

"Come on, beautiful," Eddie snapped. "You can't smell the coffee with your head up your ass."

"I don't know what that means," she said with an odd and perplexing dignity.

"It means you can take us to the cradle and risk the Wrath of Blaine, or you can stand your ground here and experience the Wrath of Eddie. It doesn't have to be a nice clean head-shot, you know. I can take you a piece at a time, and I'm feeling just mean enough to do it. I'm having a very bad day in your city—the music sucks, everybody has a bad case of b.o., and the first guy we saw threw a grenade at us and kidnapped our friend. So what do you say?"

"Why would you go to Blaine in any case?" one of the others asked. "He stirs no more from his berth in the cradle—not for years now. He has even stopped speaking in his many voices and laughing."

Speaking in his many voices and laughing? Eddie thought. He looked at Susannah. She looked back and shrugged.

"Ardis was the last to go nigh Blaine," the bloodstained woman said.

Jeeves nodded somberly. "Ardis always was a fool when he were in drink. Blaine asked him some question. I heard it, hut it made no sense to me—something about the mother of ravens, I think—and when Ardis couldn't answer what was asked, Blaine slew him with blue fire."

"Electricity?" Eddie asked.

Jeeves and the bloodstained woman both nodded. "Ay," the woman said.

"Electricity, so it were called in the old days, so it were."

"You don't have to go in with us," Susannah proposed suddenly. "Just get us within sight of the place. We'll go the rest of the way on our own."

The woman looked at her mistrustfully, and then Jeeves pulled her head close to his lips and mumbled in her ear for a while. The other Pubes stood behind them in a ragged line, looking at Eddie and Susannah with the dazed eyes of people who have survived a bad air-raid.

At last the woman looked around. "Ay," she said. "We'll take you nigh the cradle, and then it's good riddance to bad swill."

"My idea exactly," Eddie said. "You and Jeeves. The rest of you, scatter." He swept them with his eyes. "But remember this—one spear thrown from ambush, one arrow, one brick, and these two die." This threat came out sounding so weak and pointless that Eddie wished he hadn't made it. How could they possibly care for these two, or for any of the individual members of their clan, when they dusted two or more of them each and every day? Well, he thought, watching the others trot off without so much as a backward glance, it was too late to worry about that now.

"Come on," the woman said. "I want to be done with you."

"The feeling's mutual," Eddie replied.

But before she and Jeeves led them away, the woman did something which made Eddie repent a little of his hard thoughts: knelt, brushed back the hair of the man in the kilt, and placed a kiss on his dirty cheek. "Goodbye, Winston," she said. "Wait for me where the trees clear and the water's sweet. I'll come to ye, ay, as sure as dawn makes shadows run west."

"I didn't want to kill him," Susannah said. "I want you to know that. But I wanted to die even less."

"Ay." The face that turned toward Susannah was stem and tearless. "But if ye mean to enter Blaine's cradle, ye'll die anyway. And the chances are that ye'll



die envying poor old Winston. He's cruel, is Blaine. The crudest of all demons in this cruel, cruel place."

"Come on, Maud," Jeeves said, and helped her up.

"Ay. Let's finish with them." She surveyed Susannah and Eddie again, her eyes stem but somehow confused, as well. "Gods curse my eyes that they should ever have happened on you two in the first place.

And gods curse the guns ye carry, as well, for they were always the springhead of our troubles."

And with that attitude, Susannah thought, your troubles are going to last at least a thousand years, sugar.

Maud set a rapid pace along The Street of the Turtle. Jeeves trotted beside her. Eddie, who was pushing Susannah in the wheelchair, was soon panting and struggling to keep up. The palatial buildings which lined their way spread out until they resembled ivy-covered country houses on huge, run-to-riot lawns, and Eddie realized they had entered what had once been a very ritzy neighborhood indeed. Ahead of them, one building loomed above all others. It was a deceptively simple square construction of white stone blocks, its overhanging roof supported by many pillars. Eddie thought again of the gladiator movies he'd so enjoyed as a kid. Susannah, educated in more formal schools, was reminded of the Par-thenon. Both saw and marvelled at the gorgeously sculpted bestiary— Bear and Turtle, Fish and Rat, Horse and Dog—which ringed the top of the building in two-by-two parade, and understood it was the place they had come to find.

That uneasy sensation that they were being watched by many eyes— eyes filled equally with hate and wonder—never left them. Thunder boomed as they came in sight of the monorail track; like the storm, the track came sweeping in from the south, joined The Street of the Turtle, and ran straight on toward the Cradle of Lud. And as they neared it, ancient bodies began to twist and dance in the strengthening wind on either side of them.

22

AFTER THEY HAD RUN for God knew how long (all Jake knew for sure was that the drums had stopped again), Gasher once more yanked him to a stop. This time Jake managed to keep his feet. He had gotten his second wind. Gasher, who would never see eleven again, had not.

"Hoo! My old pump's doing nip-ups, sweetie."

"Too bad," Jake said unfeelingly, then stumbled backward as Gasher's gnarled hand connected with the side of his face.

"Yar, you'd cry a bitter tear if I dropped dead right here, woontcher? Too likely! But no such luck, my fine young squint—old Gasher's seen em come and seen em go, and I wasn't born to drop dead at the feet of any little sweetcheeks berry like you."

Jake listened to these incoherencies impassively. He meant to see Gasher dead before the day was over. Gasher might take Jake with him, but Jake no longer cared about that. He dabbed blood from his freshly split lip and looked at it thoughtfully, wondering at how quickly the desire to do murder could invade and conquer the human heart.

Gasher observed Jake looking at his bloody fingers and grinned. "Sap's runnin, ennet? Nor will it be the last your old pal Gasher beats out of your young tree,

unless you look sharp; unless you look wery sharp indeed." He pointed down at the cobbled surface of the narrow alley they were currently negotiating. There was a rusty manhole cover there, and Jake realized he had seen the words stamped into the steel not long ago: LaMERK FOUNDRY, they said.

"There's a grip on the side," Gasher said. "Yer see? Get your hands into that and pull away. Step lively, now, and maybe ye'll still have all your teeth when ye meet up with Tick-Tock."

Jake grasped the steel cover and pulled. He pulled hard, but not quite as hard as he could have done. The maze of streets and alleys through which Gasher had run him was bad, but at least he could see. He couldn't imagine what it might be like in the underworld below the city, where the blackness would preclude even dreams of escape, and he didn't intend to find out unless he absolutely had to.

Gasher quickly made it clear to him that he did.

"It's too heavy for—" Jake began, and then the pirate seized him by the throat and yanked him upward until they were face to face. The long run through the alleys had brought a thin, sweaty flush to his cheeks and turned the sores eating into his flesh an ugly yellow-purple color. Those which were open exuded thick infected matter and threads of blood in steady pulses. Jake caught just a whiff of Gasher's thick stench before his wind was cut off by the hand which had encircled his throat.

"Listen, you stupid cull, and listen well, for this is your last warning. You yank that fucking streethead off right now or I'll reach into your mouth and rip the living tongue right out of it. And feel free to bite all you want while I do it, for what I have runs in the blood and you'll see the first blossoms on yer own face before the week's out—if yer lives that long. Now, do you see?" Jake nodded frantically. Gasher's face was disappearing into deepening folds of gray, and his voice seemed to be coming from a great distance.

"All right." Gasher shoved him backward. Jake fell in a heap beside the manhole cover, gagging and retching. He finally managed to draw in a deep, whooping breath that burned like liquid fire. He spat out a blood-flecked wad of stuff and almost threw up at the sight of it.

"Now yank back that cover, my heart's delight, and let's have no more natter about it.

Jake crawled over to it, slid his hands into the grip, and this time pulled with all his might. For one terrible moment he thought he was still not going to be able to budge it. Then he imagined Gasher's fingers reaching into his mouth and seizing his tongue, and found a little extra. There was a dull, spreading agony in his lower back as something gave there, but the circular lid slipped slowly aside, grinding on the cobbles and exposing a grinning crescent of darkness.

"Good, cully, good!" Gasher cried cheerfully. "What a little mule y'are! Keep pulling—don't give up now!"

When the crescent had become a half-moon and the pain in Jake's lower back was a white-hot fire, Gasher booted him in the ass, knocking him asprawl.

"Wery good!" Gasher said, peering in. "Now, cully, go smartly down the ladder on the side. Mind you don't lose your grip and tumble all the way to the bottom, for those rungs are fearsome slick and greezy. There's twenty or so, as I remember. And when you get to the bottom, stand stock-still and wait for me. You might feel like runnin from yer old pal, but do you think that would be a good idea?"

"No," Jake said. "I suppose not."

"Wery intelligent, old son!" Gasher's lips spread in his hideous smile, once more revealing his few surviving teeth. "It's dark down there, and there are a thousand tunnels going every which-a-way. Yer old pal Gasher knows em like the back of his hand, so he does, but you'd be lost in no time. Then there's the rats—wery big and wery hungry they are. So you just wait."

"I will."

Gasher regarded him narrowly. "You speak just like a little triggie, you do, but you're no Pube—I'll set my watch and warrant to that. Where are you from, squint?"

Jake said nothing.

"Bumbler got your tongue, do he? Well, that's all right; Tick-Tock'll get it all out of you, so he will. He's got a way about him, Ticky does; just naturally wants to make people converse. Once he gets em goin, they sometimes talks so fast and screams so loud someone has to hit em over the head to slow em down. Bumpers ain't allowed to hold no one's tongue around the Tick-Tock Man, not even fine young triggers like you. Now get the fuck down that ladder. Hup!" He lashed out with his foot. This time Jake managed to tuck in and dodge the blow. He looked into the half-open manhole, saw the ladder, and started down. He was still chest-high to the alley when a tremendous stonelike crash hammered the air. It came from a mile or more away, but Jake knew what it was without having to be told. A cry of pure misery burst from his lips.

A grim smile tugged at the corners of Gasher's mouth. "Your hard-case friend trailed ye a little better than ye thought he would, didn't he?"

Not better than I thought, though, cully, for I got a look at his eyes— wery pert and cunning they were. I thought he'd come arter his juicy little night-nudge a right smart, if he was to come at all, and so he did. He spied the tripwires, but the fountain's got him, so that's all right. Get on, sweetcheeks."

He aimed a kick at Jake's protruding head. Jake ducked it, but one foot slipped on the ladder bolted to the side of the sewer shaft and he only saved himself from falling by clutching Gasher's scab-raddled ankle. He looked up, pleading, and saw no softening on that dying, infected face.

"Please," he said, and heard the word trying to break into a sob. He kept seeing Roland lying crushed beneath the huge fountain. What had Gasher said? If anyone wanted him, they would have to pick him up with a blotter.

"Beg if you want, dear heart. Just don't expect no good to come of it, for mercy stops on this side of the bridge, so it does. Now go down, or I'll kick your bleedin brains right outcher bleedin ears."

So Jake went down, and by the time he reached the standing water at the bottom, the urge to cry had passed. He waited, shoulders slumped and head down, for Gasher to descend and lead him to his fate.

23

ROLAND HAD COME CLOSE to tripping the crossed wires which held back the avalanche of junk, but the dangling fountain was absurd—a trap which might have been set by a stupid child. Cort had taught them to constantly check all visual quadrants as they moved in enemy territory, and that included above as well as

behind and below.

"Stop," he told Oy, raising his voice to be heard over the drums.

"Op!" Oy agreed, then looked ahead and immediately added, "Ake!"

"Yes." The gunslinger took another look up at the suspended marble fountain, then examined the street, looking for the trigger. There were two, he saw. Perhaps their camouflage as cobblestones had once been effective, but that time was long past. Roland bent down, hands on his knees, and spoke into Oy's upturned face. "Going to pick you up for a minute now. Don't fuss, Oy."  
"Oy!"

Roland put his arms around the bumbler. At first Oy stiffened and attempted to pull away, and then Roland felt the small animal give in. He wasn't happy about being this close to someone who wasn't Jake, but he clearly intended to put up with it. Roland found himself wondering again just how intelligent Oy was. He carried him up the narrow passage and beneath The Hanging Fountain of Lud, stepping carefully over the mock cobbles. Once they were safely past, he bent to let Oy go. As he did, the drums stopped.

"Ake!" Oy said impatiently. "Ake-Ake!"

"Yes—but there's a little piece of business to attend to first."

He led Oy fifteen yards farther down the alley, then bent and picked up a chunk of concrete. He tossed it thoughtfully from hand to hand, and as he did, he heard the sound of a pistol-shot from the east. The amplified thump of the drums had buried the sound of Eddie and Susan-nah's battle with the ragged band of Pubes, but he heard this gunshot clearly and smiled—it almost surely meant that the Deans had reached the cradle, and that was the first good news of this day, which already seemed at least a week long.

Roland turned and threw the piece of concrete. His aim was as true as it had been when he had thrown at the ancient traffic signal in River Crossing; the missile struck one of the discolored triggers dead center, and one of the rusty cables snapped with a harsh twang. The marble fountain dropped, rolling over as the other cable snubbed it for a moment longer—long enough so that a man with fast reflexes could have cleared the drop-zone anyway, Roland reckoned. Then it too let go, and the fountain fell like a pink, misshapen stone.

Roland dropped behind a pile of rusty steel beams and Oy jumped nimbly into his lap as the fountain hit the street with a vast, shattery thump. Chunks of pink marble, some as big as carts, flew through the air. Several small chips stung Roland's face. He brushed others out of Oy's fur. He looked over the makeshift barricade. The fountain had cracked in two like a vast plate. We won't be coming back this way, Roland thought. The passageway, narrow to begin with, was now completely blocked.

He wondered if Jake had heard the fall of the fountain, and what he had made of it if he had. He didn't waste such speculation on Gasher; Gasher would think he had been crushed to paste, which was exactly what Roland wanted him to think. Would Jake think the same thing? The boy should know better than to believe a gunslinger could be killed by such a simple device, but if Gasher had terrorized him enough, Jake might not be thinking that clearly. Well, it was too late to worry about it now, and if he had it to do over again, he would do exactly the same thing. Dying or not, Gasher had displayed both courage and animal cunning. If he was off his guard now, the trick was worth it.

Roland got to his feet. "Oy—find Jake."

"Ake!" Oy stretched his head forward on his long neck, sniffed around in a semicircle, picked up Jake's scent, and was off again with Roland running after. Ten minutes later he came to a stop at a manhole cover in the street, sniffed all the way around it, then looked up at Roland and barked shrilly.

The gunslinger dropped to one knee and observed both the confusion of tracks and a wide path of scratches on the cobbles. He thought this particular manhole cover had been moved quite often. His eyes narrowed as he saw the wad of bloody phlegm in a crease between two nearby cobbles.

"The bastard keeps hitting him," he murmured.

He pulled the manhole cover back, looked down, then untied the rawhide lacings which held his shirt closed. He picked the bumbler up and tucked him into his shirt. Oy bared his teeth, and for a moment Roland felt his claws splayed against the flesh of his chest and belly like small sharp knives. Then they withdrew and Oy only peered out of Roland's shirt with his bright eyes, panting like a steam engine. The gunslinger could feel the rapid beat of Oy's heart against his own. He pulled the rawhide lace from the eyelets in his shirt and found another, longer, lace in his purse.

"I'm going to leash you. I don't like it and you're going to like it even less, but it's going to be very dark down there."

He tied the two lengths of rawhide together and formed one end into a wide loop which he slipped over Oy's head. He expected Oy to bare his teeth again, perhaps even to nip him, but Oy didn't. He only looked up at Roland with his gold-ringed eyes and barked "Ake!" again in his impatient voice.

Roland put the loose end of his makeshift leash in his mouth, then sat down on the edge of the sewer shaft ... if that was what it was. He felt for the top rung of the ladder and found it. He descended slowly and carefully, more aware than ever that he was missing half a hand and that the steel rungs were slimy with oil and some thicker stuff that was probably moss. Oy was a heavy, warm weight between his shirt and belly, panting steadily and harshly. The gold rings in his eyes gleamed like medallions in the dim light.

At last, the gunslinger's groping foot splashed into the water at the bottom of the shaft. He glanced up briefly at the coin of white light far above him. This is where it starts getting hard, he thought. The tunnel was warm and dank and smelled like an ancient charnel house. Somewhere nearby, water was dripping hollowly and monotonously. Farther off, Roland could hear the rumble of machinery. He lifted a very grateful Oy out of his shirt and set him down in the shallow water running sluggishly along the sewer tunnel.

"Now it's all up to you," he murmured in the bumbler's ear. "To Jake, Oy. To Jake!"

"Ake!" the bumbler barked, and splashed rapidly off into the darkness, swinging his head from side to side at the end of his long neck like a pendulum. Roland followed with the end of the rawhide leash wrapped around his diminished right hand.

Susannah realized how old and gray and fundamentally grungy the rest of Lud really was. The Cradle was so clean it almost hurt her eyes. No vines overgrew its sides; no graffiti daubed its blinding white walls and steps and columns. The yellow plains dust which had coated everything else was absent here. As they drew closer, Susannah saw why: streams of water coursed endlessly down the sides of the Cradle, issuing from nozzles hidden in the shadows of the copper-sheathed eaves. Interval sprays created by other hidden nozzles washed the steps, turning them into off-and-on waterfalls.

"Wow," Eddie said. "It makes Grand Central look like a Greyhound station in Buttfuck, Nebraska."

"What a poet you are, dear," Susannah said dryly.

The steps surrounded the entire building and rose to a great open lobby. There were no obscuring mats of vegetation here, but Eddie and Susannah found they still couldn't get a good look inside; the shadows thrown by the overhanging roof were too deep. The Totems of the Beam marched all the way around the building, two by two, but the corners were reserved for creatures Susannah fervently hoped never to meet outside of the occasional nightmare—hideous stone dragons with scaly bodies, clutching, claw-tipped hands, and nasty peering eyes. Eddie touched her shoulder and pointed higher. Susannah looked . . . and felt her breath come to a stop in her throat. Standing astride the peak of the roof, far above The Totems of the Beam and the dragonish gargoyles, as if given dominion over them, was a golden warrior at least sixty feet high. A battered cowboy hat was shoved back to reveal his lined and careworn brow; a bandanna hung askew on his upper chest, as if it had just been pulled down after serving long, hard duty as a dust-muffle. In one upraised fist he held a revolver; in the other, what appeared to be an olive branch.

Roland of Gilead stood atop the Cradle of Lud, dressed in gold.

No, she thought, at last remembering to breathe again. It's not him . . . but in another way, it is. That man was a gunslinger, and the resemblance between him, who's probably been dead a thousand years or more, and Roland is all the truth of ka-tet you'll ever need to know.

Thunder slammed out of the south. Lightning harried racing clouds across the sky. She wished she had more time to study both the golden statue which stood atop the Cradle and the animals which surrounded it; each of these latter appeared to have words carved upon them, and she had an idea that what was written there might be knowledge worth having. Under these circumstances, however, there was no time to spare.

A wide red strip had been painted across the pavement at the point where The Street of the Turtle emptied into The Plaza of the Cradle. Maud and the fellow Eddie called Jeeves the Butler stopped a prudent distance from the red mark.

"This far and no farther," Maud told them flatly. "You may take us to our deaths, but each man and woman owes one to the gods anyway, and I'll die on this side of the dead-line no matter what. I'll not dare Blaine for outlanders."

"Nor will I," Jeeves said. He had taken off his dusty bowler and was holding it against his naked chest. On his face was an expression of fearful reverence.

"Fine," Susannah said. "Now scat on out of here, both of you."

"Ye'll backshoot us the second we turn from ye," Jeeves said in a trembling voice. "I'll take my watch and warrant on it, so I will."

Maud shook her head. The blood on her face had dried to a grotesque maroon

stippling. "There never were a backshooting gunslinger— that much I will say."

"We only have their word for it that that's what they are."

Maud pointed to the big revolver with the worn sandalwood grip which Susannah held in her hand. Jeeves looked . . . and after a moment he stretched out his hand to the woman. When Maud took it, Susannah's image of them as dangerous killers collapsed. They looked more like Hansel and Gretel than Bonnie and Clyde; tired, frightened, confused, and lost so long in the woods that they had grown old there. Her hate and fear of them departed. What replaced it was pity and a deep, aching sadness.

"Fare you well, both of you," she said softly. "Walk as you will, and with no fear of harm from me or my man here."

Maud nodded. "I believe you mean us no harm, and I forgive you for shooting Winston. But listen to me, and listen well: stay out of the Cradle. Whatever reasons you think you have for going in, they're not good enough. To enter Blaine's Cradle is death."

"We don't have any choice," Eddie said, and thunder banged over-head again, as if in agreement. "Now let me tell you something. I don't know what's underneath Lud and what isn't, but I do know those drums you're so whacked out about are part of a recording—a song—that was made in the world my wife and I came from." He looked at their uncom-prehending faces and raised his arms in frustration.

"Jesus Pumpkin-Pie Christ, don't you get it? You're killing each other over a piece of music that was never even released as a single!"

Susannah put her hand on his shoulder and murmured his name. He ignored her for the moment, his eyes flicking from Jeeves to Maud and then back to Jeeves again.

"You want to see monsters? Take a good look at each other, then. And when you get back to whatever funhouse it is you call home, take a good look at your friends and relatives."

"You don't understand," Maud said. Her eyes were dark and somber. "But you will. Ay—you will."

"Go on, now," Susannah said quietly. "Talk between us is no good; the words only drop dead. Just go your way and try to remember the faces of your fathers, for I think you lost sight of those faces long ago."

The two of them walked back in the direction from which they had come without another word. They did look back over their shoulders from time to time, however, and they were still holding hands: Hansel and Gretel lost in the deep dark forest.

"Lemme outta here," Eddie said heavily. He made the Ruger safe, stuck it back in the waistband of his pants, and then rubbed his red eyes with the heels of his hands. "Just lemme out, that's all I ask."

"I know what you mean, handsome." She was clearly scared, but her head had that defiant tilt he had come to recognize and love. He put his hands on her shoulders, bent down, and kissed her. He did not let either their surroundings or the oncoming storm keep him from doing a thorough job. When he pulled back at last, she was studying him with wide, dancing eyes. "Wow! What was that about?"

"About how I'm in love with you," he said, "and I guess that's about all. Is it enough?"

Her eyes softened. For a moment she thought about telling him the secret she might or might not be keeping, but of course the time and place were wrong—she could no more tell him she might be pregnant now than she could pause to read

the words written on the sculpted Portal Totems.

"It's enough, Eddie," she said.

"You're the best thing that ever happened to me." His hazel eyes were totally focused on her. "It's hard for me to say stuff like that— living with Henry made it hard, I guess—but it's true. I think I started loving you because you were everything Roland took me away from—in New York, I mean—hut it's a lot more than that now, because I don't want to go hack anymore. Do you?"

She looked at the Cradle. She was terrified of what they might find in there, but all the same . . . she looked back at him. "No, I don't want to go back. I want to spend the rest of my life going forward. As long as you're with me, that is. It's funny, you know, you saying you started loving me because of all the things he took you away from."

"Funny how?"

"I started loving you because you set me free of Detta Walker." She paused, thought, then shook her head slightly. "No—it goes further than that. I started loving you because you set me free of both those bitches. One was a foul-mouthed, cock-teasing thief, and the other was a self-righteous, pompous prig. Comes down to six of one and half a dozen of the other, as far as I'm concerned. I like Susannah Dean better than either one . . . and you were the one who set me free."

This time it was she who did the reaching, pressing her palm to his stubbly cheeks, drawing him down, kissing him gently. When he put a light hand on her breast, she sighed and covered it with her own.

"I think we better get going," she said, "or we're apt to be laying right here in the street . . . and getting wet, from the look."

Eddie stared around at the silent towers, the broken windows, the vine-encrusted walls a final time. Then he nodded. "Yeah. I don't think there's any future in this town, anyway."

He pushed her forward, and they both stiffened as the wheels of the chair passed over what Maud had called the dead-line, fearful that they would trip some ancient protective device and die together. But nothing happened. Eddie pushed her into the plaza, and as they approached the steps leading up to the Cradle, a cold, wind-driven rain began to fall.

Although neither of them knew it, the first of the great autumn storms of Mid-World had arrived.

25

ONCE THEY WERE IN the smelly darkness of the sewers, Gasher slowed the killing pace he'd maintained aboveground. Jake didn't think it was because of the darkness; Gasher seemed to know every twist and turn of the route he was following, just as advertised. Jake believed it was because his captor was satisfied that Roland had been squashed to jelly by the deadfall trap.

Jake himself had begun to wonder.

If Roland had spotted the tripwires—a far more subtle trap than the one which followed—was it really likely that he had missed seeing the fountain? Jake supposed it was possible, but it didn't make much sense. Jake thought it more likely that Roland had tripped the fountain on purpose, to lull Gasher and perhaps slow him down. He didn't believe Roland could follow them through this



maze under the streets—the total darkness would defeat even the gunslinger's tracking abilities—but it cheered his heart to think that Roland might not have died in an attempt to keep his promise.

They turned right, left, then left again. As Jake's other senses sharp-ened in an attempt to compensate for his lack of sight, he had a vague perception of other tunnels around him. The muffled sounds of ancient, laboring machinery would grow loud for a moment, then fade as the stone foundations of the city drew close around them again. Drafts blew intermittently against his skin, sometimes warm, sometimes chilly. Their splashing footfalls echoed briefly as they passed the intersecting tunnels from which these stenchy breaths blew, and once Jake nearly brained himself on some metal object jutting down from the ceiling. He slapped at it with one hand and felt something that might have been a large valve-wheel. After that he waved his hands as he trotted along in an attempt to read the air ahead of him.

Gasher guided him with taps to the shoulders, as a waggoner might have guided his oxen. They moved at a good clip, trotting but not run-ning. Gasher got enough of his breath back to first hum and then begin singing in a low, surprisingly tuneful tenor voice.

"Bibble-ti-tibble-ti-ting-ting-ting,  
I'll get a job and buy yer a ring,  
When I get my -mitts  
On yerjiggly tits,  
Ribble-ti-tibble-ti-ting-ting-ting!"

O ribble-ti-tibble,  
I just wanter fiddle,  
Fiddle around with your ting-ting-ting!"

There were five or six more verses along this line before Gasher quit. "Now you sing somethin, squint."

"I don't know anything," Jake puffed. He hoped he sounded more out of breath than he actually was. He didn't know if it would do him any good or not, but down here in the dark any edge seemed worth trying for.

Gasher brought his elbow down in the center of Jake's back, almost hard enough to send him sprawling into the ankle-high water running sluggishly through the tunnel they were traversing. "Yon better know sominat, 'less you want me to rip your ever-lovin spine right outcher back." He paused, then added: "There's haunts down here, boy. They live inside the fuckin machines, so they do. Singin keeps em off . . . don't you know that? Now sing!"

Jake thought hard, not wanting to earn another love-tap from Gasher, and came up with a song he'd learned in summer day camp at the age of seven or eight. He opened his mouth and began to bawl it into the darkness, listening to the echoes bounce back amid the sounds of running water, falling water, and ancient thudding machinery.

"My girl's a corker, she's a New Yorker,  
I buy her everything to keep her in style,  
She got a pair of hips

Just like two battleships,  
Oh boy, that's how my money goes.

My girl's a dilly, she comes from Philly,  
I buy her everything to keep her in style,  
She's got a pair of eyes  
Just like two pizza pies,  
Oh boy, that's how—"

Gasher reached out, seized Jake's ears as if they were jug-handles, and yanked him to a stop. "There's a hole right ahead of yer," he said. "With a voice like yours, squint, it'd be doin the world a mercy to letcher fall in, so it would, but Tick-Tock wouldn't approve at all, so I reckon ye're safe for a little longer." Gasher's hands left Jake's ears, which burned like fire, and fastened on the back of his shirt. "Now lean forward until you feel the ladder on the t'other side. And mind you don't slip and drag us both down!"

Jake leaned cautiously forward, hands outstretched, terrified of fall-ing into a pit he couldn't see. As he groped for the ladder, he became aware of warm air—clean and almost fragrant—whooshing past his face, and a faint blush of rose-colored light from beneath him. His fingers touched a steel rung and closed over it. The bite-wounds on his left hand broke open again, and he felt warm blood running across his palm.

"Got it?" Gasher asked.

"Yes."

"Then climb down! What are you waitin for, gods damn it!" Gasher let go of his shirt, and Jake could imagine him drawing his foot back, meaning to hurry him along with a kick in the ass. Jake stepped across the faintly glimmering gap and began to descend the ladder, using his hurt hand as little as possible. This time the rungs were clear of moss and oil, and hardly rusted at all. The shaft was very long and as Jake went down, hurrying to keep Gasher from stepping on his hands with his thick-soled boots, he found himself remembering a movie he'd once seen on TV—Journey to the Center of the Earth.

The throb of machinery grew louder and the rosy glow grew stronger. The machines still didn't sound right, but his ears told him these were in better shape than the ones above. And when he finally reached the bottom, he found the floor was dry. The new horizontal shaft was square, about six feet high, and sleeved with riveted stainless steel. It stretched away for as far as Jake could see in both directions, straight as a string. He knew instinctively, without even thinking about it, that this tunnel (which had to be at least seventy feet under Lud) also followed the path of the Beam. And somewhere up ahead—Jake was sure of this, although he couldn't have said why—the train they had come looking for lay directly above it.

Narrow ventilation grilles ran along the sides of the walls just below the shaft's ceiling; it was from these that the clean, dry air was flowing. Moss dangled from some of them in blue-gray beards, but most were still clear. Below every other grille was a yellow arrow with a symbol that looked a bit like a lower-case t. The arrows pointed in the direction Jake and Gasher were heading. The rose-colored light was coming from glass tubes which ran along the ceiling of the shaft in parallel rows. Some—about one in every three—were dark, and

others sputtered fitfully, but at least half of them were still working. Neon tubing, Jake thought, amazed. How about that?

Gasher dropped down beside him. He saw Jake's expression of surprise and grinned. "Nice, ennet? Cool in the summer, warm in the win-ter, and so much food that five hunnert men couldn't eat it in five hunnert years. And do yer know the best part, squint? The very best part of the whole coozy fakement?"

Jake shook his head.

"Farkin Pubies don't have the leastest idear the place even exists. They think there's monsters down here. Catch a Pubie goin within twenty feet of a sewer-cap, less'n he has to!"

He threw his head back and laughed heartily. Jake didn't join in, even though a cold voice in the back of his mind told him it might be politic to do so. He didn't join in because he knew exactly how the Pubes felt. There were monsters under the city—trolls and boggerts and ores. Hadn't he been captured by just such a one?

Gasher shoved him to the left. "Gam—almost there now. Hup!"

They jogged on, their footfalls chasing them in a pack of echoes. After ten or fifteen minutes of this, Jake saw a watertight hatchway about two hundred yards ahead. As they drew closer, he could see a big valve-wheel sticking out of it. A communicator box was mounted on the wall to the right.

"I'm blown out," Gasher gasped as they reached the door at the end of the tunnel. "Doin's like this are too much for an invalid like yer old pal, so they are!" He thumbed the button on the intercom and bawled: "I got im, Tick-Tock—got him as dandy as you please! Didn't even muss 'is hair! Didn't I tell yer I would? Trust the Gasherman, I said, for he'll leadjer straight and true! Now open up and let us in!"

He let go of the button and looked impatiently at the door. The valve-wheel didn't turn. Instead a flat, drawling voice came out of the intercom speaker:

"What's the password?"

Gasher frowned horribly, scratched his chin with his long, dirty nails, then lifted his eyepatch and swabbed out another clot of yellow-green goo. "Tick-Tock and his passwords!" he said to Jake. He sounded worried as well as irritated.

"He's a trig cove, but that's takin it a deal too far if you ask me, so it is."

He pushed the button and yelled, "Come on, Tick-Tock! If you don't reckergnize the sound of my voice, you need a heary-aid!"

"Oh, I recognize it," the drawling voice returned. To Jake it sounded like Jerry Reed, who played Burt Reynolds's sidekick in *Smokey and the Bandit*. "But I don't know who's with you, do I? Or have you forgotten that the camera out there went tits-up last year? You give the password, Gasher, or you can rot out there!"

Gasher stuck a finger up his nose, extracted a chunk of snot the color of mint jelly, and squashed it into the grille of the speaker. Jake watched this childish display of ill temper in silent fascination, feeling unwelcome, hysterical laughter bubbling around inside him. Had they come all this way, through the boobytrapped mazes and lightless tunnels, to be balked here at this watertight door simply because Gasher couldn't remember the Tick-Tock Man's password?

Gasher looked at him balefully, then slid his hand across his skull, peeling off his sweat-soaked yellow scarf. The skull beneath was bald, except for a few straggling tufts of black hair like porcupine quills, and deeply dented above

the left temple. Gasher peered into the scarf and plucked forth a scrap of paper. "Gods bless Hoots," he muttered. "Hoots takes care of me a right proper, he does."

He peered at the scrap, turning it this way and that, and then held it out to Jake. He kept his voice pitched low, as if the Tick-Tock Man could hear him even though the TALK button on the intercom wasn't depressed.

"You're a proper little gennelman, ain't you? And the very first thing they teach a gennelman to do after he's been lamed not to eat the paste and piss in the comers is read. So read me the word on this paper, cully, for it's gone right out of my head—so it has."

Jake took the paper, looked at it, then looked up at Gasher again. "What if I won't?" he asked coolly.

Gasher was momentarily taken aback at this response . . . and then he began to grin with dangerous good humor. "Why, I'll grab yer by the throat and use yer head for a doorknocker," he said. "I doubt if it'll convince old Ticky to let me in—for he's still nervous of your hardcase friend, so he is—but it'll do my heart a world of good to see your brains drippin off that wheel."

Jake considered this, the dark laughter still bubbling away inside him. The Tick-Tock Man was a trig enough cove, all right—he had known that it would be difficult to persuade Gasher, who was dying anyway, to speak the password even if Roland had taken him prisoner. What Tick-Tock hadn't taken into account was Gasher's defective memory.

Don't laugh. If you do, he really will beat your brains out.

In spite of his brave words, Gasher was watching Jake with real anxiety, and Jake realized a potentially powerful fact: Gasher might not be afraid of dying . . . but he was afraid of being humiliated.

"All right, Gasher," he said calmly. "The word on this piece of paper is bountiful."

"Gimme that." Gasher snatched the paper back, returned it to his scarf, and quickly wrapped the yellow cloth around his head again. He thumbed the intercom button. "Tick-Tock? Yer still there?"

"Where else would I be? The West End of the World?" The drawl-ing voice now sounded mildly amused.

Gasher stuck his whitish tongue out at the speaker, but his voice was ingratiating, almost servile. "The password's bountyful, and a fine word it is, too! Now let me in, gods cuss it!"

"Of course," the Tick-Tock Man said. A machine started up some-where nearby, making Jake jump. The valve-wheel in the center of the door spun. When it stopped, Gasher seized it, yanked it outward, grabbed Jake's arm, and propelled him over the raised lip of the door and into the strangest room he had ever seen in his life.

26

ROLAND DESCENDED INTO DUSKY pink light. Oy's bright eyes peered out from the open V of his shirt; his neck stretched to the limit of its considerable length as he sniffed at the warm air that blew through the ventilator grilles. Roland had had to depend completely on the bumbler's nose in the dark passages above, and he had been terribly afraid the animal would lose Jake's scent in the

running water . . . but when he had heard the sound of singing—first Gasher, then Jake—echoing back through the pipes, he had relaxed a little. Oy had not led them wrong.

Oy had heard it, too. Up until then he had been moving slowly and cautiously, even backtracking every now and again to be sure of himself, but when he heard Jake's voice he began to run, straining the rawhide leash. Roland was afraid he might call after Jake in his harsh voice—Ake! Ake!—but he hadn't done so. And, just as they reached the shaft which led to the lower levels of this Dycian Maze, Roland had heard the sound of some new machine—a pump of some sort, perhaps—followed by the metallic, echoing crash of a door being slammed shut. He reached the foot of the square tunnel and glanced briefly at the double line of lighted tubes which led off in either direction. They were lit with swamp-fire, he saw, like the sign outside the place which had belonged to Balazar in the city of New York. He looked more closely at the narrow chrome ventilation strips running along the top of each wall, and the arrows below them, then slipped the rawhide loop off Oy's neck. Oy shook his head impatiently, clearly glad to be rid of it.

"We're close," he murmured into the bumbler's cocked ear, "and so we have to be quiet. Do you understand, Oy? Very quiet."

"I-yet," Oy replied in a hoarse whisper that would have been funny under other circumstances.

Roland put him down and Oy was immediately off down the tunnel, neck out, muzzle to the steel floor. Roland could hear him muttering Ake-Ake! Ake-Ake! under his breath. Roland unholstered his gun and followed him.

27

EDDIE AND SUSANNAH LOOKED up at the vastness of Blaine's Cradle as the skies opened and the rain began to fall in torrents.

"It's a hell of a building, but they forgot the handicap ramps!" Eddie yelled, raising his voice to be heard over the rain and thunder.

"Never mind that," Susannah said impatiently, slipping out of the wheelchair.

"Let's get up there and out of the rain."

Eddie looked dubiously up the incline of steps. The risers were shallow . . . but there were a lot of them. "You sure, Suze?"

"Race you, white boy," she said, and began to wriggle upward with uncanny ease, using hands, muscular forearms, and the stumps of her legs.

And she almost did beat him; Eddie had the ironmongery to contend with, and it slowed him down. Both of them were panting when they reached the top, and tendrils of steam were rising from their wet clothes. Eddie grabbed her under the arms, swung her up, and then just held her with his hands locked together in the small of her back instead of dropping her back into the chair, as he had meant to do. He felt randy and half-crazy without the slightest idea why.

Oh, give me a break, he thought. You've gotten this far alive; that's what's got your glands pumped up and ready to party.

Susannah licked her full lower lip and wound her strong fingers into his hair. She pulled. It hurt . . . and at the same time it felt wonderful. "Told you I'd beat you, white boy," she said in a low, husky voice.

"Get outta here—I had you ... by half a step." He tried to sound less out of

breath than he was and found it was impossible.

"Maybe . . . but it blew you out, didn't it?" One hand left his hair, slid downward, and squeezed gently. A smile gleamed in her eyes. "Somethin ain't blown out, though."

Thunder rumbled across the sky. They flinched, then laughed together.

"Come on," he said. "This is nuts. The time's all wrong."

She didn't contradict him, but she squeezed him again before returning her hand to his shoulder. Eddie felt a pang of regret as he swung her back into her chair and ran her across vast flagstones and under cover of the roof. He thought he saw the same regret in Susannah's eyes.

When they were out of the downpour, Eddie paused and they looked back. The Plaza of the Cradle, The Street of the Turtle, and all the city beyond was rapidly disappearing into a shifting gray curtain. Eddie wasn't a bit sorry. Lud hadn't earned itself a place in his mental scrapbook of fond memories.

"Look," Susannah murmured. She was pointing at a nearby down-spout. It ended in a large, scaly fish-head that looked like a close relation to the dragon-gargoyles which decorated the corners of the Cradle. Water ran from its mouth in a silver torrent.

"This isn't just a passing shower, is it?" Eddie asked.

"Nope. It's gonna rain until it gets tired of it, and then it's gonna rain some more, just for spite. Maybe a week; maybe a month. Not that it's gonna matter to us, if Blaine decides he doesn't like our looks and fries us. Fire a shot to let Roland know we got here, sugar, and then we'll have us a look around. See what we can see."

Eddie pointed the Ruger into the gray sky, pulled the trigger, and fired the shot, which Roland heard a mile or more away, as he followed Jake and Gasher through the booby-trapped maze. Eddie stood where he was a moment longer, trying to persuade himself that things might still turn out all right, that his heart was wrong in its stubborn insistence that they had seen the last of the gunslinger and the boy Jake. Then he made the automatic safe again, returned it to the waistband of his pants, and went back to Susannah. He turned her chair away from the steps and rolled her along an aisle of columns which led deeper into the build-ing. She popped the cylinder of Roland's gun and reloaded it as they went.

Under the roof the rain had a secret, ghostly sound and even the harsh thundercracks were muted. The columns which supported the structure were at least ten feet in diameter, and their tops were lost in the gloom. From up there in the shadows, Eddie heard the cooing con-versation of pigeons.

Now a sign hanging on thick chrome-silver chains swam out of the shadows:

NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS WELCOMES YOU  
TO THE CRADLE OF LUD  
<— SOUTHEAST TRAVEL (BLAINE)  
NORTHWEST TRAVEL (PATRICIA) —>

"Now we know the name of the one that fell in the river," Eddie said. "Patricia. They got their colors wrong, though. It's supposed to be pink for girls and blue for boys, not the other way around."

"Maybe they're both blue."

"They're not. Blaine's pink."

"How would you know that?"

Eddie looked confused. "I don't know how . . . but I do."

They followed the arrow pointing toward Blaine's berth, entering what had to be a grand concourse. Eddie didn't have Susannah's ability to see the past in clear, visionary flashes, but his imagination nonetheless filled this vast, pillared space with a thousand hurrying people; he heard clicking heels and murmuring voices, saw embraces of homecoming and farewell. And over everything, the speakers chanting news of a dozen different destinations.

Patricia is now boarding for Northwest Baronies . . .

Will Passenger Killington, passenger Killington, please report to the information booth on the lower level?

Blaine is now arriving at Berth #2, and will be debarking shortly . . .

Now there was only the pigeons.

Eddie shivered.

"Look at the faces," Susannah murmured. "I don't know if they give you the willies, but they sure do me." She was pointing to the right.

High up on the wall, a series of sculpted heads seemed to push out of tin-marble, peering down at them from the shadows—stern men with the harsh faces of executioners who are happy in their work. Some of the faces had fallen from their places and lay in granite shards and splinters seventy or eighty feet below their peers. Those remaining were spider-webbed with cracks and splattered with pigeon dung.

"They must have been the Supreme Court, or something," Eddie said, uneasily scanning all those thin lips and cracked, empty eyes. "Only judges can look so smart and so completely pissed off at the same time— you're talking to a guy who knows. There isn't one of them who looks like he'd give a crippled crab a crutch."

" 'A heap of broken images, where the sun beats and the dead tree gives no shelter,' " Susannah murmured, and at these words Eddie felt gooseflesh waltz across the skin of his arms and chest and legs.

"What's that, Suze?"

"A poem by a man who must have seen Lud in his dreams," she said. "Come on, Eddie. Forget them."

"Easier said than done." But he began to push her again.

Ahead, a vast gridded barrier like a castle barbican swam out of the gloom . . . and beyond it, they caught their first glimpse of Blaine the Mono. It was pink, just as Eddie had said it would be, a delicate shade which matched the veins running through the marble pillars. Blaine flowed above the wide loading platform in a smooth, streamlined bullet shape which looked more like flesh than metal. Its surface was broken only once—by a triangular window equipped with a huge wiper. Eddie knew there would be another triangular window with another big wiper on the other side of the mono's nose, so that if you looked at Blaine head-on, it would seem to have a face, just like Charlie the Choo-Choo. The wipers would look like slyly drooping eyelids.

White light from the southeastern slot in the Cradle fell across Blaine in a

long, distorted rectangle. To Eddie, the body of the train looked like the breaching back of some fabulous pink whale—one that was utterly silent.

"Wow." His voice had fallen to a whisper. "We found it."

"Yes. Blaine the Mono."

"Is it dead, do you think? It looks dead."

"It's not. Sleeping, maybe, but a long way from dead."

"You sure?"

"Were you sure it would be pink?" It wasn't a question he had to answer, and he didn't. The face she turned up to him was strained and badly frightened. "It's sleeping, and you know what? I'm scared to wake it up."

"Well, we'll wait for the others, then."

She shook her head. "I think we better try to lx- ready for when they get here . . . because I've got an idea that they're going to come on the run. Push me over to that box mounted on the bars. It looks like an intercom. See it?"

He did, and pushed her slowly toward it. It was mounted on one side of a closed gate in the center of the barrier which ran the length of the Cradle. The vertical bars of the barrier were made of what looked like stainless steel; those of the gate appeared to be ornamental iron, and their lower ends disappeared into steel-ringed holes in the floor. There was no way either of them was going to wriggle through those bars, either, Eddie saw. The gap between each set was no more than four inches. It would have been a tight squeeze even for Oy.

Pigeons ruffled and cooed overhead. The left wheel of Susannah's chair squawked monotonously. My kingdom for an oilcan, Eddie thought, and realized he was a lot more than just scared. The last time he had felt this level of terror had been on the day when he and Henry had stood on the sidewalk of Rhinehold Street in Dutch Hill, looking at the slumped ruin of The Mansion. They hadn't gone in on that day in 1977; they had turned their backs on the haunted house and walked away, and he remembered vowing to himself that he would never, never, ever go back to that place. It was a promise he'd kept, but here he was, in another haunted house, and there was the haunter, right over there— Blaine the Mono, a long low pink shape with one window peering at him like the eye of a dangerous animal who is shamming sleep.

He stirs no more from his berth in the Cradle. . . . He has even stopped speaking in his many voices and laughing. . . . Ardis was the last to go nigh Blaine . . . and when Ardis couldn't answer what was asked, Blaine slew him with blue fire.

If it speaks to me, I'll probably go crazy, Eddie thought.

The wind gusted outside, and a fine spray of rain flew in through the tall egress slot cut in the side of the building. He saw it strike Blaine's window and bead up there.

Eddie shuddered suddenly and looked sharply around. "We're being watched—I can feel it."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised. Push me closer to the gate, Eddie. I want to get a better look at that box."

"Okay, but don't touch it. If it's electrified—"

"If Blaine wants to cook us, he will," Susannah said, looking through the bars at Blaine's back. "You know it, and I do, too."

And because Eddie knew that was only the truth, he said nothing.



The box looked like a combination intercom and burglar alarm. There was a speaker set into the top half, with what looked like a TALK/LISTEN button next to it. Below this were numbers arranged in a shape which made a diamond:

1  
2 3  
4 5 6  
7 8 9 10  
11 12 13 14 15  
16 17 18 19 20 21  
22 23 24 25 26 27 28  
29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36  
37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45  
46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55  
56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64  
65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72  
73 74 75 76 77 78 79  
80 81 82 83 84 85  
86 87 88 89 90  
91 92 93 94  
95 96 97  
98 99  
100

Under the diamond were two other buttons with words of the High Speech printed on them: COMMAND and ENTER.

Susannah looked bewildered and doubtful. "What is this thing, do you think? It looks like a gadget in a science fiction movie."

Of course it did, Eddie realized. Susannah had probably seen a home security system or two in her time—she had, after all, lived among the Manhattan rich, even if she had not been very enthusiastically accepted by them—but there was a world of difference between the electronics gear available in her when, 1963, and his own, which was 1987. We've never talked much about the differences, either, he thought. I wonder what she'd think if I told her Ronald Reagan was President of the United States when Roland snatched me? Probably that I was crazy.

"It's a security system," he said. Then, although his nerves and instincts screamed out against it, he forced himself to reach out with his right hand and thumb the TALK/LISTEN switch.

There was no crackle of electricity; no deadly blue fire went racing up his arm. No sign that the thing was even still connected.

Maybe Blaine is dead. Maybe he's dead, after all.

But he didn't really believe that.

"Hello?" he said, and in his mind's eye saw tin- unfortunate Ardis, screaming as he- was microwaved by the blue fire dancing all over his face and body, melting his eyes and setting his hair ablaze. "Hello . . . Blaine? Anybody ?"

He let go of the button and waited, stiff with tension. Susannah's hand crept into his, cold and small. There was still no answer, and Eddie—now more reluctant than ever—pushed the button again.

"Blaine?"

He let go of the button. Waited. And when there was still no answer, a dangerous

giddiness overcame him, as it often did in moments of stress and fear. When that giddiness took him, counting the cost no longer seemed to matter. Nothing mattered. It had been like that when he had outfaced Balazar's sallow-faced contact man in Nassau, and it was like that now. And if Roland had seen him in the moment this lunatic impatience overtook him, he would have seen more than just a resemblance between Eddie and Cuthbert; he would have sworn Eddie was Cuthbert.

He jammed the button in with his thumb and began to bellow into the speaker, adopting a plummy (and completely bogus) British accent. "Hullo, Blaine! Cheerio, old fellow! This is Robin Leach, host of Life-styles of the Rich and Brainless, here to tell you that you have won six billion dollars and a new Ford Escort in the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes!"

Pigeons took flight above them in soft, startled explosions of wings. Susannah gasped. Her face wore the dismayed expression of a devout woman who has just heard her husband blaspheme in a cathedral. "Eddie, stop it! Stop it!"

Eddie couldn't stop it. His mouth was smiling, but his eyes glittered with a mixture of fear, hysteria, and frustrated anger. "You and your monorail girlfriend, Patricia, will spend a lux-yoo-rious month in scenic Jimtown, where you'll drink only the finest wine and eat only the finest virgins! You—" ". . . shhhh . . ."

Eddie broke off, looking at Susannah. He was at once sure that it had been she who had shushed him—not only because she had already tried but because she was the only other person here—and yet at the same time he knew it hadn't been Susannah. That had been another voice: the voice of a very young and very frightened child.

"Suze? Did you—"

Susannah was shaking her head and raising her hand at the same time. She pointed at the intercom box, and Eddie saw the button marked COMMAND was glowing a very faint shell-pink. It was the same color as the mono sleeping in its berth on the other side of the barrier.

"Shhh... don't wake him up," the child's voice mourned. It drifted from the speaker, soft as an evening breeze.

"What . . ." Eddie began. Then he shook his head, reached toward the TALK/LISTEN switch and pressed it gently. When he spoke again, it was not in the blaring Robin Leach bellow but in the almost-whisper of a conspirator. "What are you? Who are you?"

He released the button. He and Susannah regarded each other with the big eyes of children who now know they are sharing the house with a dangerous—perhaps psychotic—adult. How have they come by the knowledge? Why, because another child has told them, a child who has lived with the psychotic adult for a long time, hiding in corners and stealing out only when it knows the adult is asleep; a frightened child who happens to be almost invisible.

There was no answer. Eddie let the seconds spin out. Each one seemed long enough to read a whole novel in. He was reaching for the button again when the faint pink glow reappeared.

"I'm Little Blaine," the child's voice whispered. "The one he doesn't see. The one he forgot. The one he thinks he left behind in the rooms of ruin and the halls of the dead."

Eddie pushed the button again with a hand that had picked up an uncontrollable

shake. He could hear that shake in his voice, as well. "Who? Who is the one who doesn't see? Is it the Bear?"

No—not the bear; not he. Shardik lay dead in the forest, many miles behind them; the world had moved on even since then. Eddie suddenly remembered what it had been like to lay his ear against that strange unfound door in the clearing where the bear had lived its violent half-life, that door with its somehow terrible stripes of yellow and black. It was all of a piece, he realized now; all part of some awful, decaying whole, a tattered web with the Dark Tower at its center like an incomprehensible stone spider. All of Mid-World had become one vast haunted mansion in these strange latter days; all of Mid-World had become The Drawers; all of Mid-World had become a waste land, haunting and haunted. He saw Susannah's lips form the words of the real answer before the voice from the intercom could speak them, and those words were as obvious as the solution to a riddle once the answer is spoken.

"Big Blaine," the unseen voice whispered. "Big Blaine is the ghost in the machine—the ghost in all the machines."

Susannah's hand had gone to her throat and was clutching it, as if she intended to strangle herself. Her eyes were full of terror, but they were not glassy, not stunned; they were sharp with understanding. Perhaps she knew a voice like this one from her own when—the when where the integrated whole that was Susannah had been shunted aside by the warring personalities of Detta and Odetta. The childish voice had surprised her as well as him, but her agonized eyes said she was no stranger to the concept being expressed.

Susannah knew all about the madness of duality.

"Eddie we have to go," she said. Her terror turned the words into an unpunctuated auditory smear. He could hear air whistling in her wind-pipe like a cold wind around a chimney. "Eddie we have to get away Eddie we have to get away Eddie—"

"Too late," the tiny, mourning voice said. "He's awake. Big Blaine is awake. He knows you are here. And he's coming."

Suddenly lights—bright orange arc-sodiums—began to flash on in pairs above them, bathing the pillared vastness of the Cradle in a harsh glare that banished all shadows. Hundreds of pigeons darted and swooped in frightened, aimless flight, startled from their complex of interlocked nests high above.

"Wait!" Eddie shouted. "Please, wait!"

In his agitation he forgot to push the button, but it made no difference; Little Blaine responded anyway. "No! I can't let him catch me! I can't let him kill me, too!"

The light on the intercom box went dark again, but only for a moment. This time both COMMAND and ENTER lit up, and their color was not pink but the lurid dark red of a blacksmith's forge.

"WHO ARE YOU?" a voice roared, and it came not just from the box but from every speaker in the city which still operated. The rotting bodies hanging from the poles shivered with the vibrations of that mighty voice; it seemed that even the dead would run from Blaine, if they could. .

Susannah shrank back in her chair, the heels of her hands pressed to her ears, her face long with dismay, her mouth distorted in a silent scream. Eddie felt himself shrinking toward all the fantastic, hallucinatory terrors of eleven. Had it been this voice he had feared when he and Henry stood outside The Mansion?

That he had perhaps even antici-pated? He didn't know . . . but he did know how Jack in that old story must have felt when he realized that he had tried the beanstalk once too often, and awakened the giant.

"HOW DARE YOU DISTURB MY SLEEP? TELL ME NOW, OR DIE WHERE YOU STAND."

He might have frozen right there, leaving Blaine—Big Blaine—to do to them whatever it was he had done to Ardis (or something even worse); perhaps should have frozen, locked in that down-the-rabbit-hole, fairy-tale terror. It was the memory of the small voice which had spoken first that enabled him to move. It had been the voice of a terrified child, but it had tried to help them, terrified or not.

So now you have to help yourself, he thought. You woke it up; deal with it, for Christ's sake!

Eddie reached out and pushed the button again. "My name is Eddie Dean. The woman with me is my wife, Susannah. We're . . ."

He looked at Susannah, who nodded and made frantic motions for him to go on.

"We're on a quest. We seek the Dark Tower which lies in the Path of the Beam. We're in the company of two others, Roland of Gilead and . . . and Jake of New York. We're from New York too. If you're—" He paused for a moment, biting back the words Big Blaine. If he used them, he might make the intelligence behind the voice aware that they had heard another voice; a ghost inside the ghost, so to speak.

Susannah gestured again for him to go on, using both hands.

"If you're Blaine the Mono . . . well ... we want you to take us."

He released the button. There was no response for what seemed like a very long time, only the agitated flutter of the disturbed pigeons from overhead. When Blaine spoke again, his voice came only from the speaker-box mounted on the gate and sounded almost human.

"DO NOT TRY MY PATIENCE. ALL THE DOORS TO THAT WHERE ARE CLOSED. GILEAD IS NO MORE, AND THOSE KNOWN AS GUNSLINGERS ARE ALL DEAD. NOW ANSWER MY QUESTION: WHO ARE YOU? THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE."

There was a sizzling sound. A ray of brilliant blue-white light lanced down from the ceiling and seared a hole the size of a golf-ball in the marble floor less than five feet to the left of Susannah's wheelchair. Smoke that smelled like the aftermath of a lightning-bolt rose lazily from it. Susannah and Eddie stared at each other in mute terror for a moment, and then Eddie lunged for the communicator-box and thumbed the button.

"You're wrong! We did come from New York! We came through the doors, on the beach, only a few weeks ago!"

"It's true!" Susannah called. "I swear it is!"

Silence. Beyond the long barrier, Blaine's pink back humped smoothly. The window at the front seemed to regard them like a vapid glass eye. The wiper could have been a lid half-closed in a sly wink.

"PROVE IT," Blaine said at last.

"Christ, how do I do that?" Eddie asked Susannah.

"I don't know."

Eddie pushed the button again. "The Statue of Liberty! Does that ring a bell?"

"GO ON," Blaine said. Now the voice sounded almost thoughtful.

"The Empire State Building! The Stock Exchange! The World Trade Center! Coney Island Red-Hots! Radio City Music Hall! The East Vil—"

Blaine cut him off . . . and now, incredibly, the voice which came from the speaker was the drawling voice of John Wayne.

"OKAY, PILGRIM. I BELIEVE YOU."

Eddie and Susannah shared another glance, this one of confusion and relief. But when Blaine spoke again, the voice was again cold and emotionless.

"ASK ME A QUESTION, EDDIE DEAN OF NEW YORK. AND IT BETTER BE A GOOD ONE." There was a pause, and then Blaine added: "BECAUSE IF IT'S NOT, YOU AND YOUR WOMAN ARE GOING TO DIE, NO MATTER WHERE YOU CAME FROM."

Susannah looked from the box on the gate to Eddie. "What's it talking about?" she hissed.

Eddie shook his head. "I don't have the slightest idea."

28

To JAKE, THE ROOM Gasher dragged him into looked like a Minuteman missile silo which had been decorated by the inmates of a lunatic asylum: part museum, part living room, part hippie crash pad. Above him, empty space vaulted up to a rounded ceiling and below him it dropped seventy-five or a hundred feet to a similarly rounded base. Running all around the single curved wall in vertical lines were tubes of neon in alternating strokes of color: red, blue, green, yellow, orange, peach, pink. These long tubes came together in roaring rainbow knots at the bottom and top of the silo ... if that was what it had been.

The room was about three-quarters of the way up the vast capsule-shaped space and floored with rusty iron grillework. Rugs that looked Turkish (he later learned that such rugs were actually from a barony called Kashmin) lay on the grilled floor here and there. Their corners were held down with brass-bound trunks or standing lamps or the squat legs of over-stuffed chairs. If not, they would have flapped like strips of paper tied to an electric fan, because a steady warm draft rushed up from below. Another draft, this one issuing from a circular band of venti-lators like the ones in the tunnel they had followed here, swirled about four or five feet above Jake's head. On the far side of the room was a door identical to the one through which he and Gasher had entered, and Jake assumed it was a continuation of the subterranean corridor following the Path of the Beam.

There were half a do/en people in the room, four men and two women. Jake guessed that he was looking at the Gray high command— if, that was, there were enough Grays left to warrant a high command. None of them were young, but all were still in the prime of their lives. They looked at Jake as curiously as he looked at them.

Sitting in the center of the room, with one massive leg thrown casually over the arm of a chair big enough to be a throne, was a man who looked like a cross between a Viking warrior and a giant from a child's fairy-tale. His heavily muscled upper body was naked except for a silver band around one bicep, a knife-scabbard looped over one shoulder, and a strange charm about his neck. His lower body was clad in soft, tight-fitting leather breeches which were tucked into high boots. He wore a yellow scarf tied around one of these. His hair, a dirty gray-blond, cascaded almost to the middle of his broad back; his eyes were as green and curious as the eyes of a tomcat who is old enough to be wise but not old enough to have lost that refined sense of cruelty which passes for

fun in feline circles. Hung by its strap from the back of the chair was what looked like a very old machine-gun.

Jake looked more closely at the ornament on the Viking's chest and saw that it was a coffin-shaped glass box hung on a silver chain. Inside it, a tiny gold clock-face marked the time at five minutes past three. Below the face, a tiny gold pendulum went back and forth, and despite the soft whoosh of circulating air from above and below, he could hear the tick-tock sound it made. The hands of the clock were moving faster than they should have done, and Jake was not very surprised to see that they were moving backward.

He thought of the crocodile in Peter Pan, the one that was always chasing after Captain Hook, and a little smile touched his lips. Gasher saw it, and raised his hand. Jake cringed away, putting his own hands to his face.

The Tick-Tock Man shook his finger at Gasher in an amusing school-marmish gesture. "Now, now ... no need of that, Gasher," he said.

Gasher lowered his hand at once. His face had changed completely. Before, it had alternated between stupid rage and a species of cunning, almost existential humor. Now he only looked servile and adoring. Like the others in the room (and Jake himself), the Gasherman could not look away from Tick-Tock for long; his eyes were drawn inexorably back. And Jake could understand why. The Tick-Tock Man was the only person here who seemed wholly vital, wholly healthy, and wholly alive.

"If you say there's no need, there ain't," Gasher said, but he favored Jake with a dark look before shifting his eyes back to the blonde giant on the throne.

"Still, he's wery pert, Ticky. Wery pert, Ticky. Wery pert indeed, so he is, and if you want my opinion, he'll take a deal of training!"

"When I want your opinion, I'll ask for it, the Tick-Tock Man said. "Now close the door, Cash—was yon lx>re in a barn?"

A dark-haired woman laughed shrilly, a sound like the caw of a crow. Tick-Tock flicked his eyes toward her; she quieted at once and cast her eyes down to the grilled floor.

The door through which Gasher had dragged him was actually two doors. The arrangement reminded Jake of the way spaceship airlocks looked in the more intelligent science fiction movies. Gasher shut them both and turned to Tick-Tock, giving him a thumbs-up gesture. The Tick-Tock Man nodded and reached languidly up to press a button set into a piece of furniture that looked like a speaker's podium. A pump began to cycle wheezily within the wall, and the neon tubes dimmed perceptibly. There was a faint hiss of air and the valve-wheel of the inside door spun shut. Jake supposed the one in the outer door was doing the same. This was some sort of bomb-shelter, all right; no doubt of that. When the pump died, the long neon tubes resumed their former muted brilliance.

"There," Tick-Tock said pleasantly. His eyes began to look Jake up and down. Jake had a clear and very uncomfortable sense of being expertly catalogued and filed. "All safe and sound, we are. Snug as bugs in a rug. Right, Hoots?"

"Yar!" a tall, skinny man in a black suit replied promptly. His face was covered with some sort of rash which he scratched obsessively.

"I brung him," Gasher said. "I told yer you could trust me to do it, and didn't I?"

"You did," Tick-Tock said. "Bang on. I had some doubts about your ability to remember the password at the end, there, but—"

The dark-haired woman uttered another shrill caw. The Tick-Tock Man half-turned in her direction, that lazy smile dimpling the corners of his mouth, and before Jake was able to grasp what was happening—what had already happened—she was staggering backward, her eyes bulging in surprise and pain, her hands groping at some strange tumor in the middle of her chest which hadn't been there a second before.

Jake realized the Tick-Tock Man had made some sort of move as he was turning, a move so quick it had been no more than a flicker. The slim white hilt which had protruded from the scabbard looped over the Tick-Tock Man's shoulder was gone. The knife was now on the other side of the room, sticking out of the dark-haired woman's chest. Tick-Tock had drawn and thrown with an uncanny speed Jake wasn't sure even Roland could match. It had been like some malign magic trick.

The others watched silently as the woman staggered toward Tick-Tock, gagging harshly, her hands wrapped loosely around the hilt of the knife. Her hip bumped one of the standing lamps and the one called Hoots darted forward to catch it before it could fall. Tick-Tock himself never moved; he only went on sitting with his leg tossed over the arm of his throne, watching the woman with his lazy smile.

Her foot caught beneath one of the rugs and she tumbled forward. Once more the Tick-Tock Man moved with that spooky speed, pulling back the foot which had been dangling over the arm of the chair and then driving it forward again like a piston. It buried itself in the pit of the dark-haired woman's stomach and she went flying backward. Blood spewed from her mouth and splattered the furniture. She struck the wall, slid down it, and ended up sitting with her chin on her breastbone. To Jake she looked like a movie Mexican taking a siesta against an adobe wall. It was hard for him to believe she had gone from living to dead with such terrible speed. Neon tubes turned her hair into a haze that was half red and half blue. Her glazing eyes stared at the Tick-Tock Man with terminal amazement.

"I told her about that laugh," Tick-Tock said. His eyes shifted to the other woman, a heavysset redhead who looked like a long-haul trucker. "Didn't I, Tilly?"

"Ay," Tilly said at once. Her eyes were lustrous with fear and excitement, and she licked her lips obsessively. "So you did, many and many a time. I'll set my watch and warrant on it."

"So you might, if you could reach up your fat ass far enough to find them," Tick-Tock said. "Bring me my knife, Brandon, and mind you wipe that slut's stink off it before you put it in my hand."

A short, bandy-legged man hopped to do as he had been bidden. The knife wouldn't come free at first; it seemed caught on the unfortunate dark-haired woman's breastbone. Brandon threw a terrified glance over his shoulder at the Tick-Tock Man and then tugged harder.

Tick-Tock, however, appeared to have forgotten all about both Brandon and the woman who had literally laughed herself to death. His brilliant green eyes had fixed on something which interested him much more than the dead woman.

"Come here, cully," he said. "I want a better look at you."

Gasher gave him a shove. Jake stumbled forward. He would have fallen if Tick-Tock's strong hands hadn't caught him by the shoulders. Then, when he was sure Jake had his balance again, Tick-Tock grasped the boy's left wrist and

raised it. It was Jake's Seiko which had drawn his interest.

"If this here's what I think it is, it's an omen for sure and true," Tick-Tock said. "Talk to me, boy—what's this sigul you wear?"

Jake, who hadn't the slightest idea what a sigul was, could only hope for the best. "It's a watch. But it doesn't work, Mr. Tick-Tock."

Hoots chuckled at that, then clapped both hands over his mouth when the Tick-Tock Man turned to look at him. After a moment, Tick-Toc looked back at Jake, and a sunny smile replaced the frown. Looking at that smile almost made you forget that it was a dead woman and not a movie Mexican taking a siesta over there against the wall. Looking at it almost made you forget that these people were crazy, and the Tick-Tock Man was likely the craziest inmate in the whole asylum.

"Watch," Tick-Tock said, nodding. "Ay, a likely enough name for such; after all, what does a person want with a timepiece but to watch it once in a while? Ay, Brandon? Ay, Tilly? Ay, Gasher?"

They responded with eager affirmatives. The Tick-Tock Man favored them with his winning smile, then turned back to Jake again. Now Jake noticed that the smile, winning or not, stopped well short of the Tick-Tock Man's green eyes. They were as they had been throughout: cool, cruel, and curious.

He reached a finger toward the Seiko, which now proclaimed the time to be ninety-one minutes past seven—A.M. and P.M.—and pulled it back just before touching the glass above the liquid crystal display. "Tell me, dear boy—is this 'watch' of yours boobyrigged?"

"Huh? Oh! No. No, it's not boobyrigged." Jake touched his own finger to the face of the watch.

"That means nothing, if it's set to the frequency of your own body," the Tick-Tock Man said. He spoke in the sharp, scornful tone Jake's father used when he didn't want people to figure out that he didn't have the slightest idea what he was talking about. Tick-Tock glanced briefly at Brandon, and Jake saw him weigh the pros and cons of making the bowlegged man his designated toucher. Then he dismissed the notion and looked back into Jake's eyes. "If this thing gives me a shock, my little friend, you're going to be choking to death on your own sweetmeats in thirty seconds."

Jake swallowed hard but said nothing. The Tick-Tock Man reached out his finger again, and this time allowed it to settle on the face of the Seiko. The moment that it did, all the numbers went to zeros and then began to count upward again. Tick-Tock's eyes had narrowed in a grimace of potential pain as he touched the face of the watch. Now their corners crinkled in the first genuine smile Jake had seen from him. He thought it was partly pleasure at his own courage but mostly simple wonder and interest.

"May I have it?" he asked Jake silkily. "As a gesture of your goodwill, shall we say? I am something of a clock fancier, my dear young cully— so I am."

"Be my guest." Jake stripped the watch off his arm at once and dropped in onto the Tick-Tock Man's large waiting palm.

"Talks just like a little silk-arse gennelman, don't he?" Gasher said happily.

"In the old days someone would have paid a wery high price for the return o' such as him, Ticky, ay, so they would. Why, my father—"

"Your father died so blowed-out-rotten with the mandrus that not even the dogs would eat him," the Tick-Tock Man interrupted. "Now shut up, you idiot."



At first Gasher looked furious . . . and then only abashed. He sank into a nearby chair and closed his mouth.

Tick-Tock, meanwhile, was examining the Seiko's expansion band with an expression of awe. He pulled it wide, let it snap back, pulled it wide again, let it snap back again. He dropped a lock of his hair into the open links, then laughed when they closed on it. At last he slipped the watch over his hand and pushed it halfway up his forearm. Jake thought this souvenir of New York looked very strange there, but said nothing.

"Wonderful!" Tick-Tock exclaimed. "Where did you get it, cully?"

"It was a birthday present from my father and mother," Jake said. Gasher leaned forward at this, perhaps wanting to mention the idea of ransom again. If so, the intent look on the Tick-Tock Man's face changed his mind and he sat back without saying anything.

"Was it?" Tick-Tock marvelled, raising his eyebrows. He had discovered the small button which lit the face of the watch and kept pushing it, watching the light go off and on. Then he looked back at Jake, and his eyes were narrowed to bright green slits again. "Tell me something, cully—does this run on a dipolar or unipolar circuit?"

"Neither one," Jake said, not knowing that his failure to say he did not know what either of these terms meant was buying him a great deal of future trouble.

"It runs on a nickel-cadmium battery. At least I'm pretty sure it does. I've never had to replace it, and I lost the instruction folder a long time ago."

The Tick-Tock Man looked at him for a long time without speaking, and Jake realized with dismay that the blonde man was trying to decide if Jake had been making fun of him. If he decided Jake had been making fun, Jake had an idea that the abuse he had suffered on the way here would seem like tickling compared to what the Tick-Tock Man might do. He suddenly wanted to divert Tick-Tock's train of thought—wanted that more than anything in the world. He said the first thing he thought might turn the trick.

"He was your grandfather, wasn't he?"

The Tick-Tock Man raised his brows interrogatively. His hands returned to Jake's shoulders, and although his grip was not tight, Jake could feel the phenomenal strength there. If Tick-Tock chose to tighten his grip and pull sharply forward, he would snap Jake's collarbones like pencils. If he shoved, he would probably break his back.

"Who was my grandfather, cully?"

Jake's eyes once more took in the Tick-Tock Man's massive, nobly shaped head and broad shoulders. He remembered what Susannah had said: Look at the size of him, Roland—they must have had to grease him to get him into the cockpit!

"The man in the airplane. David Quick."

The Tick-Tock Man's eyes widened in surprise and amazement. Then he threw back his head and roared out a gust of laughter that echoed off the domed ceiling high above. The others smiled nervously. None, however, dared to laugh right out loud . . . not after what had happened to the woman with the dark hair.

"Whoever you are and wherever you come from, boy, you're the triggest cove old Tick-Tock's run into for many a year. Quick was my great-grandfather, not my grandfather, but you're close enough—wouldn't you say so, Gasher, my dear?"

"Ay," Gasher said. "He's trig, right enough, I could've toldjer that. But wery pert, all the same."

"Yes," the Tick-Tock Man said thoughtfully. His hands tightened on the boy's shoulders and drew Jake closer to that smiling, handsome, lunatic face. "I can see he's pert. It's in his eyes. But we'll take care of that, won't we, Gasher?" It's not Gasher he's talking to, Jake thought. It's me. He thinks he's hypnotizing me . . . and maybe he is.

"Ay," Gasher breathed.

Jake felt he was drowning in those wide green eyes. Although the Tick-Tock Man's grip was still not really tight, he couldn't get enough breath into his lungs.

He summoned all of his own force in an effort to break the blonde man's hold over him, and again spoke the first words which came to mind:

"So fell Lord Perth, and the countryside did shake with that thunder."

It acted upon Tick-Tock like a hard open-handed blow to the face. He recoiled, green eyes narrowing, his grip on Jake's shoulders tightening painfully. "What do you say? Where did you hear that?"

"A little bird told me," Jake replied with calculated insolence, and the next instant he was flying across the room.

If he had struck the curved wall headfirst, he would have been knocked cold or killed. As it happened, he struck on one hip, rebounded, and landed in a heap on the iron grillework. He shook his head groggily, looked around, and found himself face to face with the woman who was not taking a siesta. He uttered a shocked cry and crawled away on his hands and knees. Hoots kicked him in the chest, flipping him onto his back. Jake lay there gasping, looking up at the knot of rainbow colors where the neon tubes came together. A moment later, Tick-Tock's face filled his field of vision. The man's lips were pressed together in a hard, straight line, his cheeks flared with color, and there was fear in his eyes. The coffin-shaped glass ornament he wore around his neck dangled directly in front of Jake's eyes, swinging gently back and forth on its silver chain, as if imitating the pendulum of the tiny grandfather clock inside.

"Gasher's right," he said. He gathered a handful of Jake's shirt into one fist and pulled him up. "You're pert. But you don't want to be pert with me, cully. You don't ever want to be pert with me. Have you heard of people with short fuses? Well, I have no fuse at all, and there's a thousand could testify to it if I hadn't stilled their tongues for good. If you ever speak to me of Lord Perth again . . . ever, ever, ever . . . I'll tear off the top of your skull and eat your brains. I'll have none of that bad-luck story in the Cradle of the Grays. Do you understand me?"

He shook Jake back and forth like a rag, and the boy burst into tears.

"Do you?"

"Y-Y-Yes!"

"Good." He set Jake upon his feet, where he swayed woozily back and forth, wiping at his streaming eyes and leaving smudges of dirt on his cheeks so dark they looked like mascara. "Now, my little cull, we're going to have a question and answer session here. I'll ask the questions and you'll give the answers. Do you understand?"

Jake didn't reply. He was looking at a panel of the ventilator grille which circled the chamber.

The Tick-Tock Man grabbed his nose between two of his fingers and squeezed it viciously. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes!" Jake cried. His eyes, now watering with pain as well as terror, returned

to Tick-Tock's face. He wanted to look back at the ventilator grille, wanted desperately to verify that what he had seen there was not simply a trick of his frightened, overloaded mind, but he didn't dare. He was afraid someone else—Tick-Tock himself, most likely—would follow his gaze and see what he had seen.

"Good." Tick-Tock pulled Jake back over to the chair by his nose, sat down, and cocked his leg over the arm again. "Let's have a nice little chin, then. We'll begin with your name, shall we? Just what might that be, cully?"

"Jake Chambers." With his nose pinched shut, his voice sounded nasal and foggy.

"And are you a Not-See, Jake Chambers?"

For a moment Jake wondered if this was a peculiar way of asking him if he was blind . . . but of course they could all see he wasn't. "I don't understand what—"

Tick-Tock shook him back and forth by the nose. "Not-See! Not-See! You just want to stop playing with me, boy!"

"I don't understand—" Jake began, and then he looked at the old machine-gun hanging from the chair and thought once more of the crashed Focke-Wulf. The pieces fell together in his mind. "No—I'm not a Nazi. I'm an American. All that ended long before I was born!"

The Tick-Tock Man released his hold on Jake's nose, which immediately began to gush blood. "You could have told me that in the first place and saved yourself all sorts of pain, Jake Chambers . . . but at least now you understand how we do things around here, don't you?"

Jake nodded.

"Ay. Well enough! We'll start with the simple questions."

Jake's eyes drifted back to the ventilator grille. What he had seen before was still there; it hadn't been just his imagination. Two gold-ringed eyes floated in the dark behind the chrome louvers.

Oy.

Tick-Tock slapped his face, knocking him back into Gasher, who immediately pushed him forward again. "It's school-time, dear heart," Gasher whispered.

"Mind yer lessons, now! Mind em wery sharp!"

"Look at me when I'm talking to you," Tick-Tock said. "I'll have some respect, Jake Chambers, or I'll have your balls."

"All right."

Tick-Tock's green eyes gleamed dangerously. "All right what?"

Jake groped for the right answer, pushing away the tangle of questions and the sudden hope which had dawned in his mind. And what came was what would have served at his own Cradle of the Pubes . . . otherwise known as The Piper School.

"All right, sir?"

Tick-Tock smiled. "That's a start, boy," he said, and leaned forward, forearms on his thighs. "Now . . . what's an American?"

Jake began to talk, trying with all his might not to look toward the ventilator grille as he did so.

problems.

Oy stood by his left boot, looking up anxiously, waiting for Roland to open the door so they could continue the journey to Jake. The gunslinger only wished it was that easy. It wouldn't do to simply stand out here and wait for someone to leave; it might be hours or even days before one of the Grays decided to use this particular exit again. Gasher and his friends might take it into their heads to flay Jake alive while the gunslinger was waiting for it to happen. He leaned his head against the steel but heard nothing. That didn't surprise him, either. He had seen doors like this a long time ago—you couldn't shoot out the locks, and you certainly couldn't hear through them. There might be one; there might be two, facing each other, with some dead airspace in between. Somewhere, though, there would be a button which would spin the wheel in the middle of the door and release the locks. If Jake could reach that button, all might still be well.

Roland understood that he was not a full member of this ka-tet; he guessed that even Oy was more fully aware than he of the secret life which existed at its heart (he very much doubted that the bumbler had tracked Jake with his nose alone through those tunnels where water ran in polluted streamlets).

Nevertheless, he had been able to help Jake when the boy had been trying to cross from his world to this one. He had been able to see . . . and when Jake had been trying to regain the key he had dropped, he had been able to send a message.

He had to be very careful about sending messages this time. At best, the Grays would realize something was up. At worst, Jake might misinterpret what Roland tried to tell him and do something foolish.

But if he could see . . .

Roland closed his eyes and bent all his concentration toward Jake. He thought of the boy's eyes and sent his ka out to find them.

At first there was nothing, but at last an image began to form. It was a face framed by long, gray-blond hair. Green eyes gleamed in deep sockets like firedims in a cave. Roland quickly understood that this was the Tick-Tock Man, and that he was a descendent of the man who had died in the air-carriage—interesting, but of no practical value in this situation. He tried to look beyond the Tick-Tock Man, to see the rest of the room in which Jake was being held, and the people in it.

"Ake," Oy whispered, as if reminding Roland that this was neither the time nor the place to take a nap.

"Shhh," the gunslinger said, not opening his eyes.

But it was no good. He caught only blurs, probably because Jake's concentration was focused so tightly on the Tick-Tock Man; everyone and everything else was little more than a series of gray-shrouded shapes on the edges of Jake's perception.

Roland opened his eyes again and pounded his left fist lightly into the open palm of his right hand. He had an idea that he could push harder and see more . . . but that might make the boy aware of his presence. That would be dangerous. Casher might smell a rat, and if he didn't the Tick-Tock Man would.

He looked up at the narrow ventilator grilles, then down at Oy. He had wondered several times just how smart he was; now it looked as though he was going to find out.

Roland reached up with his good left hand, slipped his fingers between the horizontal slats of the ventilator grille closest to the hatchway through which Jake had been taken, and pulled. The grille popped out in a shower of rust and dried moss. The hole behind it was far too small for a man . . . but not for a billy-bumbler. He put the grille down, picked Oy up, and spoke softly into his ear.

"Go . . . see . . . come back. Do you understand? Don't let them see you. Just go and see and come back."

Oy gazed up into his face, saying nothing, not even Jake's name. Roland had no idea if he had understood or not, but wasting time in ponderation would not help matters. He placed Oy in the ventilator shaft. The bumbler sniffed at the crumbles of dried moss, sneezed delicately, then only crouched there with the draft rippling through his long, silky fur, looking doubtfully at Roland with his strange eyes.

"Go and see and come back," Roland repeated in a whisper, and Oy disappeared into the shadows, walking silently, claws retracted, on the pads of his paws. Roland drew his gun again and did the hardest thing. He waited.

Oy returned less than three minutes later. Roland lifted him out of the shaft and put him on the floor. Oy looked up at him with his long neck extended. "How many, Oy?" Roland asked. "How many did you see?"

For a long moment he thought the bumbler wouldn't do anything except go on staring in his anxious way. Then he lifted his right paw tentatively in the air, extended the claws, and looked at it, as if trying to remember something very difficult. At last he began to tap on the steel floor.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four. A pause. Then two more, quick and delicate, the extended claws clicking lightly on the steel: five, six. Oy paused a second time, head down, looking like a child lost in the throes of some titanic mental struggle. Then he tapped his claws one final time on the steel, looking up at Roland as he did it. "Ake!"

Six. Grays . . . and Jake.

Roland picked Oy up and stroked him. "Good!" he murmured into Oy's ear. In truth, he was almost overwhelmed with surprise and grati-tude. He had hoped for something, but this careful response was amaz-ing. And he had few doubts about the accuracy of the count. "Good boy!"

"Oy! Ake!"

Yes, Jake. Jake was the problem. Jake, to whom he had made a promise he intended to keep.

The gunslinger thought deeply in his strange fashion—that combina-tion of dry pragmatism and wild intuition which had probably come from his strange grandmother, Deidre the Mad, and had kept him alive all these years after his old companions had passed. Now he was depending on it to keep Jake alive, too. He picked Oy up again, knowing Jake might live—might—but the bumbler was almost certainly going to die. He whispered several simple words into Oy's cocked ear, repeating them over and over. At last he ceased speaking and returned him to the ventilator shaft. "Good boy," he whispered. "Go on, now. Get it done. My heart goes with you."

"Oy! Art! Ake!" the bumbler whispered, and then scurried off into the darkness again.

Roland waited for all hell to break loose.

ASK ME A QUESTION, Eddie Dean of New York. And it better be a good one . . . if it's not, you and your woman are going to die, no matter where you came from.

And, dear God, how did you respond to something like that?

The dark red light had gone out; now the pink one reappeared. "Hurry," the faint voice of Little Blaine urged them. "He's worse than ever before . . . hurry or he'll kill you!"

Eddie was vaguely aware that flocks of disturbed pigeons were still swooping aimlessly through the Cradle, and that some of them had smashed headfirst into the pillars and dropped dead on the floor.

"What does it want?" Susannah hissed at the speaker and the voice of Little Blaine somewhere behind it. "For God's sake, what does it want?"

No reply. And Eddie could feel any period of grace they might have started with slipping away. He thumbed the TALK/LISTEN and spoke with frantic vivacity as the sweat trickled down his cheeks and neck.

Ask me a question.

"So—Blaine! What have you been up to these last few years? I guess you haven't been doing the old southeast run, huh? Any reason why not? Haven't been feeling up to snuff?"

No sound but the rustle and flap of the pigeons. In his mind he saw Ardis trying to scream as his cheeks melted and his tongue caught fire.

He felt the hair on the nape of his neck stirring and clumping together. Fear? Or gathering electricity?

Hurry . . . he's worse than ever before.

"Who built you, anyway?" Eddie asked frantically, thinking: If I only knew what the fucking thing wanted! "Want to talk about that? Was it the Grays? Nah . . . probably the Great Old Ones, right? Or . . ."

He trailed off. Now he could feel Blaine's silence as a physical weight on his skin, like fleshy, groping hands.

"What do you want?" he shouted. "Just what in hell do you want to hear?"

No answer—but the buttons on the box were glowing an angry dark red again, and Eddie knew their time was almost up. He could hear a low buzzing sound nearby—a sound like an electrical generator—and he didn't believe that sound was just his imagination, no matter how much he wanted to think so.

"Blaine!" Susannah shouted suddenly. "Blaine, do you hear me?"

No answer . . . and Eddie felt the air was filling up with electricity as a bowl under a tap fills up with water. He could feel it crackling bitterly in his nose with every breath he took; could feel his fillings buzzing like angry insects.

"Blaine, I've got a question, and it is a pretty good one! Listen!" She closed her eyes for a moment, fingers rubbing frantically at her temples, and then opened her eyes again. "There is a thing that . . . uh . . . that nothing is, and yet it has a name; 'tis sometimes tall and . . . and sometimes short . . ."

"She broke off and stared at Eddie with wide, agonized eyes. "Help me! I can't remember how the rest of it goes!"

Eddie only stared at her as if she had gone mad. What in the name of God was she talking about? Then it came to him, and it made a weirdly perfect sense, and the rest of the riddle clicked into his mind as neatly as the last two pieces of a

jigsaw puzzle. He swung toward the speaker again.

"It joins our talks, it joins our sport, and plays at every game.' What is it?

That's our question, Blaine—what is it?"

The red light illuminating the COMMAND and ENTER buttons below the diamond of numbers blinked out. There was an endless moment of silence before Blaine spoke again . . . but Eddie was aware that the feeling of electricity crawling all over his skin was diminishing.

"A SHADOW, OF COURSE," the voice of Blaine responded. "AN EASY ONE . . . BUT NOT BAD. NOT BAD AT ALL."

The voice coming out of the speaker was animated by a thoughtful quality . . . and something else, as well. Pleasure? Longing? Eddie couldn't quite decide, but he did know there was something in that voice that reminded him of Little Blaine. He knew something else, as well: Susannah had saved their bacon, at least for the time being. He bent down and kissed her cold, sweaty brow.

"DO YOU KNOW ANY MORE RIDDLES?" Blaine asked.

"Yes, lots," Susannah said at once. "Our companion, Jake, has a whole book of them."

"FROM THE NEW YORK PLACE OF WHERE?" Blaine asked, and now the tone of his voice was perfectly clear, at least to Eddie. Blaine might be a machine, but Eddie had been a heroin junkie for six years, and he knew stone greed when he heard it.

"From New York, right," he said. "But Jake has been taken prisoner. A man named Gasher took him."

No answer . . . and then the buttons glowed that faint, rosy pink again. "Good so far," the voice of Little Blaine whispered. "But you must be careful . . . he's tricky. . . ."

The red lights reappeared at once.

"DID ONE OF YOU SPEAK?" Blaine's voice was cold and—Eddie could have sworn it was so—suspicious.

He looked at Susannah. Susannah looked back with the wide, fright-ened eyes of a little girl who has heard something unnameable moving slyly beneath the bed.

"I cleared my throat, Blaine," Eddie said. He swallowed and arched sweat from his forehead. "I'm . . . shit, tell the truth and shame the devil. I'm scared to death."

"THAT IS VERY WISE OF YOU. THESE RIDDLES OF WHICH YOU SPEAK—ARE THEY STUPID? I WON'T HAVE MY PATIENCE TRIED WITH STUPID RIDDLES."

"Most are smart," Susannah said, but she looked anxiously at Eddie as she said it.

"YOU LIE. YOU DON'T KNOW THE QUALITY OF THESE RIDDLES AT ALL."

"How can you say—"

"VOICE ANALYSIS. FRICTIVE PATTERNS AND DIPH-THONG STRESS-EMPHASIS PROVIDE A RELIABLE QUOTIENT OF TRUTH/UNTRUTH. PREDICTIVE RELIABILITY IS 97 PER CENT, PLUS OR MINUS .5 PER CENT." The voice fell silent for a moment, and when it spoke again, it did so in a menacing drawl that Eddie found very familiar. It was the

voice of Humphrey Bogart. "I SHUGGEST YOU SHTICK TO WHAT YOU KNOW, SHWEET-HEART. THE LAST GUY THAT TRIED SHADING THE TRUTH WITH ME WOUND UP AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEND IN A PAIR OF SHEMENT COWBOY BOOTS."

"Christ," Eddie said. "We walked four hundred miles or so to meet the computer version of Rich Little. How can you imitate guys like John Wayne and Humphrey Bogart, Blaine? Guys from our world?"

Nothing.

"Okay, you don't want to answer that one. How about this one—if a riddle was what you wanted, why didn't you just say so?"

Again there was no answer, but Eddie discovered that he didn't really need one. Blaine liked riddles, so he had asked them one. Susannah had solved it. Eddie guessed that if she had failed to do so, the two of them would now look like a couple of giant-economy-size charcoal bri-quets lying on the floor of the Cradle of Lud.

"Blaine?" Susannah asked uneasily. There was no answer. "Blaine, are you still there?"

"YES. TELL ME ANOTHER ONE."

"When is a door not a door?" Eddie asked.

"WHEN IT'S AJAR. YOU'LL HAVE TO DO BETTER THAN THAT IF YOU REALLY EXPECT ME TO TAKE YOU SOME-WHERE. CAN YOU DO BETTER THAN THAT?"

"If Roland gets here, I'm sure we can," Susannah said. "Regardless of how good the riddles in Jake's book may be, Roland knows hundreds—he actually studied them as a child." Having said this, she realized she could not conceive of Roland as a child. "Will you take us, Blaine?"

"I MIGHT," Blaine said, and Eddie was quite sure he heard a dim thread of cruelty running through that voice. "BUT YOU'LL HAVE TO PRIME THE PUMP TO GET ME GOING, AND MY PUMP PRIMES BACKWARD."

"Meaning what?" Eddie asked, looking through the bars at the smooth pink line of Blaine's back. But Blaine did not reply to this or any of the other questions they asked. The bright orange lights stayed on, but both Big Blaine and Little Blaine seemed to have gone into hibernation. Eddie, however, knew better. Blaine was awake. Blaine was watching them. Blaine was listening to their frictive patterns and diphthong stress-emphasis.

He looked at Susannah.

"You'll have to prime the pump, but my pump primes backward," he said bleakly. "It's a riddle, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course." She looked at the triangular window, so like a half-lidded, mocking eye, and then pulled him close so she could whisper in his ear. "It's totally insane, Eddie—schizophrenic, paranoid, probably delusional as well."

"Tell me about it," he breathed back. "What we've got here is a lunatic genius ghost-in-the-computer monorail that likes riddles and goes faster than the speed of sound. Welcome to the fantasy version of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

"Do you have any idea what the answer is?"

Eddie shook his head. "You?"

"A little tickle, way back in my mind. False light, probably. I keep thinking about what Roland said: a good riddle is always sensible and always solvable. It's like a magician's trick."

"Misdirection."

She nodded. "Go fire another shot, Eddie—let em know we're still here."

"Yeah. Now if we could only be sure that they're still there."

"Do you think they are, Eddie?"

Eddie had started away, and he spoke without stopping or looking back. "I don't know—that's a riddle not even Blaine could answer."



"COULD I HAVE SOMETHING to drink?" Jake asked. His voice came out sounding furry and nasal. Both his mouth and the tissues in his abused nose were swelling up. He looked like someone who has gotten the worst of it in a nasty street-fight.

"Oh, yes," Tick-Tock replied judiciously. "You could. I'd say you certainly could. We have lots to drink, don't we, Copperhead?"

"Ay," said a tall, bespectacled man in a white silk shirt and a pair of black silk trousers. He looked like a college professor in a turn-of-the-century Punch cartoon. "No shortage of po-ter-bulls here."

The Tick-Tock Man, once more seated at ease in his throne-like chair, looked humorously at Jake. "We have wine, beer, ale, and, of course, good old water. Sometimes that's all a body wants, isn't it? Cool, clear, sparkling water. How does that sound, cully?"

Jake's throat, which was also swollen and as dry as sandpaper, prick-led painfully. "Sounds good," he whispered.

"It's woke my thirsty up, I know that," Tick-Tock said. His lips spread in a smile. His green eyes sparkled. "Bring me a dipper of water, Tilly—I'll be damned if I know what's happened to my manners."

Tilly stepped through the hatchway on the far side of the room—it was opposite the one through which Jake and Gasher had entered. Jake watched her go and licked his swollen lips.

"Now," Tick-Tock said, returning his gaze to Jake, "you say the American city you came from—this New York—is much like Lud."

"Well . . . not exactly ..."

"But you do recognize some of the machinery, Tick-Tock pressed. "Valves and pumps and such. Not to mention the firedim tubes."

"Yes. We call it neon, but it's the same."

Tick-Tock reached out toward him. Jake cringed, but Tick-Tock only patted him on the shoulder. "Yes, yes; close enough." His eyes gleamed. "And you've heard of computers?"

"Sure, but—"

Tilly returned with the dipper and timidly approached the Tick-Tock Man's throne. He took it and held it out to Jake. When Jake reached for it, Tick-Tock pulled it back and drank himself. As Jake watched the water trickle from Tick-Tock's mouth and roll down his naked chest, he began to shake. He couldn't help it.

The Tick-Tock Man looked over the dipper at him, as if just remembering that Jake was still there. Behind him, Gasher, Copperhead, Bran-don, and Hoots were grinning like schoolyard kids who have just heard an amusing dirty joke.

"Why, I got thinking about how thirsty I was and forgot all about you!"

Tick-Tock cried. "That's mean as hell, gods damn my eyes! But, of course, it looked so good . . . and it is good . . . cold . . . clear ..."

He held the dipper out to Jake. When Jake reached for it, Tick-Tock pulled it back.

"First, cully, tell me what you know about dipolar computers and transitive circuits," he said coldly.

"What ..." Jake looked toward the ventilator grille, but the golden eyes were still gone. He was beginning to think he had imagined them after all. He shifted his gaze back to the Tick-Tock Man, understanding one thing clearly: he wasn't

going to get any water. He had been stupid to even dream he might. "What are dipolar computers?"

The Tick-Tock Man's face contorted with rage; he threw the remainder of the water into Jake's bruised, puffy face. "Don't you play it light with me!" he shrieked. He stripped off the Seiko watch and shook it in front of Jake. "When I asked you if this ran on a dipolar circuit, you said it didn't! So don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about when you already made it clear that you do!"

"But . . . but ..." Jake couldn't go on. His head was whirling with fear and confusion. He was aware, in some far-off fashion, that he was licking as much water as he could off his lips.

"There's a thousand of those ever-fucking dipolar computers right under the ever-fucking city, maybe a HUNDRED thousand, and the only one that still works don't do a thing except play Watch Me and run those drums! I want those computers! I want them working for ME!"

The Tick-Tock Man bolted forward on his throne, seized Jake, shook him back and forth, and then threw him to the floor. Jake struck one of the lamps, knocking it over, and the bulb blew with a hollow coughing sound. Tilly gave a little shriek and stepped backward, her eyes wide and frightened. Copperhead and Brandon looked at each other uneasily.

Tick-Tock leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, and screamed into Jake's face: "I want them AND I MEAN TO HAVE THEM!"

Silence fell in the room, broken only by the soft whoosh of warm air pouring from the ventilators. Then the twisted rage on the Tick-Tock Man's face disappeared so suddenly it might never have existed at all. It was replaced by another charming smile. He leaned further forward and helped Jake to his feet.

"Sorry. I get thinking about the potential of this place and sometimes I get carried away. Please accept my apology, cully." He picked up the overturned dipper and threw it at Tilly. "Fill this up, you useless bitch! What's the matter with you?"

He turned his attention back to Jake, still smiling his TV game-show host smile.

"All right; you've had your little joke and I've had mine. Now tell me everything you know about dipolar computers and transitive circuits. Then you can have a drink."

Jake opened his mouth to say something—he had no idea what—and then, incredibly, Roland's voice was in his mind, filling it.

Distract them, Jake—and if there's a button that opens the door, get close to it.

The Tick-Tock Man was watching him closely. "Something just came into your mind, didn't it, cully? I always know. So don't keep it a secret; tell your old friend Ticky."

Jake caught movement in the corner of his eye. Although he did not dare glance up at the ventilator panel—not with all the Tick-Tock Man's notice bent upon him—he knew that Oy was back, peering down through the louvers.

Distract them . . . and suddenly Jake knew just how to do that.

"I did think of something," he said, "but it wasn't about computers. It was about my old pal Gasher. And his old pal, Hoots."

"Here! Here!" Gasher cried. "What are you talking about, boy?"

"Why don't you tell Tick-Tock who really gave you the password, Gasher? Then I

can tell Tick-Tock where you keep it."

The Tick-Tock Man's puzzled gaze shifted from Jake to Gasher. "What's he talking about?"

"Nothin!" Gasher said, but he could not forbear a quick glance at Hoots. "He's just runnin his gob, tryin to get off the hot-seat by puttin me on it, Ticky. I told you he was pert! Didn't I say—"

Take a look in his scarf, why don't you?" Jake asked. "He's got a scrap of paper with the word written on it. I had to read it to him because he couldn't even do that."

There was no sudden rage on Tick-Tock's part this time; his face darkened gradually instead, like a summer sky before a terrible thunderstorm.

"Let me see your scarf, Gasher," he said in a soft, thick voice. "Let your old pal sneak a peek."

"He's lyin, I tell you!" Gasher cried, putting his hands on his scarf and taking two steps backward toward the wall. Directly above him, Oy's gold-ringed eyes gleamed. "All you got to do is look in his face to see lyin's what a pert little cull like him does best!"

The Tick-Tock Man shifted his gaze to Hoots, who looked sick with fear. "What about it?" Tick-Tock asked in his soft, terrible voice. "What about it, Hooterman? I know you and Gasher was butt-buddies of old, and I know you've the brains of a hung goose, but surely not even you could be stupid enough to write down a password to the inner chamber . . . could you? Could you?"

"I . . . I oney thought . . ." Hoots began.

"Shut up!" Gasher shouted. He shot Jake a look of pure, sick hate. "I'll kill you for this, dearie—see if I don't."

"Take off your scarf, Gasher," the Tick-Tock Man said. "I want a look inside it."

Jake sidled a step closer to the podium with the burtons on it.

"No!" Gasher's hands returned to the scarf and pressed against it as if it might fly away of its own accord. "Be damned if I will!"

"Brandon, grab him," Tick-Tock said.

Brandon lunged for Gasher. Gasher's move wasn't as quick as Tick-Tock's had been, but it was quick enough; he bent, yanked a knife from the top of his boot, and buried it in Brandon's arm.

"Oh, you barstard!" Brandon shouted in surprise and pain as blood began to pour out of his arm.

"Lookit what you did!" Tilly screamed.

"Do I have to do everything around here myself?" Tick-Tock shouted, more exasperated than angry, it seemed, and rose to his feet. Gasher retreated from him, weaving the bloody knife back and forth in front of his face in mystic patterns. He kept his other hand planted firmly on top of his head.

"Draw back," he panted. "I loves you like a brother, Ticky, but if you don't draw back, I'll hide this blade in your guts—so I will."

"You? Not likely," the Tick-Tock Man said with a laugh. He removed his own knife from its scabbard and held it delicately by the bone hilt. All eyes were on the two of them. Jake took two quick steps to the podium with its little cluster of buttons and reached for the one he thought the Tick-Tock man had pushed. Gasher was backing along the curved wall, the tubes of light painting his mandrus-riddled face in a succession of sick colors: bile-green, fever-red,

jaundice-yellow. Now it was the Tick-Tock Man standing below the ventilator grille where Oy was watching.

"Put it down, Gasher," Tick-Tock said in a reasonable tone of voice. "You brought the boy as I asked; if anyone else gets pricked over this, it'll be Hoots, not you. Just show me—"

Jake saw Oy crouching to spring and understood two things: what the humbler meant to do and who had put him up to it.

"Oy, no!" he screamed.

All of them turned to look at him. At that moment Oy leaped, hitting the flimsy ventilator grille and knocking it free. The Tick-Tock Man wheeled toward the sound, and Oy fell onto his upturned face, biting and slashing.

32

ROLAND HEARD IT FAINTLY even through the twin doors—Oy, no!—and his heart sank.

He waited for the valve-wheel to turn, but it did not. He closed his eyes and sent with all his might: The door, Jake! Open the door!

He sensed no response, and the pictures were gone. His communication line with Jake, flimsy to begin with, had now been severed.

33

THE TICK-TOCK MAN blundered backward, cursing and screaming and grabbing at the writhing, biting, digging thing on his face. He felt Oy's claws punch into his left eye, popping it, and a horrible red pain sank into his head like a flaming torch thrown down a deep well. At that point, rage overwhelmed pain. He seized Oy, tore him off his face, and held him over his head, meaning to twist him like a rag.

"No!" Jake wailed. He forgot about the button which unlocked the doors and seized the gun hanging from the back of the chair.

Tilly shrieked. The others scattered. Jake levelled the old German machine-gun at the Tick-Tock Man. Oy, upside down in those huge, strong hands and bent almost to the snapping point, writhed madly and slashed his teeth into the air. He shrieked in agony—a horribly human sound.

"Leave him alone, you bastard!" Jake screamed, and pressed the trigger. He had enough presence of mind left to aim low. The roar of the Schmeisser .40 was ear-splitting in the enclosed space, although it fired only five or six rounds. One of the lighted tubes popped in a burst of cold orange fire. A hole appeared an inch above the left knee of the Tick-Tock Man's tight-fitting trousers, and a dark red stain began to spread at once. Tick-Tock's mouth opened in a shocked O of surprise, an expression which said more clearly than words could have done that, for all his intelligence, Tick-Tock had expected to live a long, happy life where he shot people but was never shot himself. Shot at, perhaps, but actually hit? That surprised expression said that just wasn't supposed to be in the cards.

Welcome to the real world, you fuck, Jake thought.

Tick-Tock dropped Oy to the iron grillework floor to grab at his wounded leg. Copperhead lunged at Jake, got an arm around his throat, and then Oy was on him, barking shrilly and chewing at Copperhead's ankle through the black silk pants.

Copperhead screamed and danced away, shaking Oy back and forth at the end of his leg. Oy clung like a limpet. Jake turned to see the Tick-Tock Man crawling toward him. He had retrieved his knife and the blade was now clamped between his teeth.

"Goodbye, Ticky," Jake said, and pressed the Schmeisser's trigger again. Nothing happened. Jake didn't know if it was empty or jammed, and this was hardly the time to speculate. He took two steps backward before finding further retreat blocked by the big chair which had served the Tick-Tock Man as a throne. Before he could slip around, putting the chair between them, Tick-Tock had grabbed his ankle. His other hand went to the hilt of his knife. The ruins of his left eye lay on his cheek like a glob of mint jelly; the right eye glared up at Jake with insane hatred.

Jake tried to pull away from the clutching hand and went sprawling on the Tick-Tock man's throne. His eye fell on a pocket which had been sewn into the right-hand arm-rest. Jutting from the elasticized top was the cracked pearl handle of a revolver.

"Oh, cully, how you'll suffer!" the Tick-Tock Man whispered ecstatically. The O of surprise had been replaced by a wide, trembling grin. "Oh how you'll suffer! And how happy I'll be to ... What—?"

The grin slackened and the surprised O began to reappear as Jake pointed the cheesy nickel-plated revolver at him and thumbed back the hammer. The grip on Jake's ankle tightened until it seemed to him that the bones there must snap.

"You dasn't!" Tick-Tock said in a screamy whisper.

"Yes I do," Jake said grimly, and pulled the trigger of the Tick-Tock Man's runout gun. There was a Hat crack, much less dramatic than the Schmeisser's Teutonic roar. A small black hole appeared high up on the right side of Tick-Tock's forehead. The Tick-Tock Man went on staring up at Jake, disbelief in his remaining eye.

Jake tried to make himself shoot him again and couldn't do it.

Suddenly a flap of the Tick-Tock Man's scalp peeled away like old wallpaper and dropped on his right cheek. Roland would have known what this meant; Jake, however, was now almost beyond coherent thought. A dark, panicky horror was spinning across his mind like a tornado funnel. He cringed back in the big chair as the hand on his ankle fell away and the Tick-Tock Man collapsed forward on his face.

The door. He had to open the door and let the gunslinger in.

Focusing on that and nothing but, Jake let the pearl-handled revolver clatter to the iron grating and pushed himself out of the chair. He was reaching again for the button he thought he had seen Tick-Tock push when a pair of hands settled around his throat and dragged him back-ward, away from the podium.

"I said I'd kill you for it, my narsty little pal," a voice whispered in his ear, "and the Gasherman always keeps his promises."

Jake flailed behind him with both hands and found nothing but thin air. Gasher's fingers sank into his throat, choking relentlessly. The world started to turn gray in front of his eyes. Gray quickly deepened to purple, and purple to black.

Gods be thanked! Roland thought. He seized the wheel with his right hand almost before it had stopped moving and yanked it open. The other door was ajar; from beyond it came the sounds of men fighting and Oy's bark, now shrill with pain and fury.

Roland kicked the door open with his boot and saw Gasher throttling Jake. Oy had left Copperhead and was now trying to make Gasher let go of Jake, but Gasher's boot was doing double duty: protecting its owner from the bumbler's teeth, and protecting Oy from the virulent infection which ran in Gasher's blood. Brandon stabbed Oy in the flank again in an effort to make him stop worrying Gasher's ankle, but Oy paid no heed. Jake hung from his captor's dirty hands like a puppet whose strings have been cut. His face was bluish-white, his swollen lips a delicate shade of lavender.

Gasher looked up. "You," he snarled.

"Me," Roland agreed. He fired once and the left side of Gasher's head disintegrated. The man went flying backward, bloodstained yellow scarf unravelling, and landed on top of the Tick-Tock Man. His feet drummed spastically on the iron grillework for a moment and then fell still.

The gunslinger shot Brandon twice, fanning the hammer of his revolver with the flat of his right hand. Brandon, who had been bent over Oy for another stroke, spun around, struck the wall, and slid slowly down it, clutching at one of the tubes. Green swamplight spilled out from between his loosening fingers.

Oy limped to where Jake lay and began licking his pale, still face.

Copperhead and Hoots had seen enough. They ran side by side for the small door through which Tilly had gone to get the dipper of water. It was the wrong time for chivalry; Roland shot them both in the back. He would have to move fast now, very fast indeed, and he would not risk being waylaid by these two if they should chance to rediscover their guts.

A cluster of bright orange lights came on at the top of the capsule-shaped enclosure, and an alarm began to go off: in broad, hoarse blasts that bartered the walls. After a moment or two, the emergency lights began to pulse in sync with the alarm.

35

EDDIE WAS RETURNING TO Susannah when the alarm began to wail. He yelled in surprise and raised the Ruger, pointing it at nothing. "What's happening?"

Susannah shook her head—she had no idea. The alarm was scary, but that was only part of the problem; it was also loud enough to be physically painful. Those amplified jags of sound made Eddie think of a tractor-trailer horn raised to the tenth power.

At that moment, the orange arc-sodiums began to pulse. When he reached Susannah's chair, Eddie saw that the COMMAND and ENTER buttons were also pulsing in bright red beats. They looked like winking eyes.

"Blaine, what's happening?" he shouted. He looked around but saw only wildly jumping shadows. "Are you doing this?"

Blaine's only response was laughter—terrible mechanical laughter that made Eddie think of the clockwork clown that had stood outside the House of Horrors at Coney Island when he was a little kid.

"Blaine, stop it!" Susannah shrieked. "How can we think of an answer to your

riddle with that air-raid siren going off?"

The laughter stopped us suddenly as it began, but Blaine made no reply. Or perhaps he did; from beyond the bars that separated them from the platform, huge engines powered by frictionless slo-trans turbines awoke at the command of the dipolar computers the Tick-Tock Man had so lusted after. For the first time in a decade, Blaine the Mono was awake and cycling up toward running speed.

36

THE ALARM, WHICH HAD indeed been built to warn Lud's long-dead residents of an impending air attack (and which had not even been tested in almost a thousand years), blanketed the city with sound. All the lights which still operated came on and began to pulse in sync. Pubes above the streets and Grays below them were alike convinced that the end they had always feared was finally upon them. The Grays suspected some cataclysmic mechanical breakdown was occurring. The Pubes, who had always believed that the ghosts lurking in the machines below the city would some day rise up to take their long-delayed vengeance on the still living, were probably closer to the actual truth of what was happening.

Certainly there had been an intelligence left in the ancient computers below the city, a single living organism which had long ago ceased to exist sanely under conditions that, within its merciless dipolar circuits, could only be absolute reality. It had held its increasingly alien logic within its banks of memory for eight hundred years and might have held them so for eight hundred more, if not for the arrival of Roland and his friends; yet this mens non corpus had brooded and grown ever more insane with each passing year; even in its increasing periods of sleep it could be said to dream, and these dreams grew steadily more abnormal as the world moved on. Now, although the unthinkable machinery which maintained the Beams had weakened, this insane and inhuman intelligence had awakened in the rooms of ruin and had begun once more, although as bodiless as any ghost, to stumble through the halls of the dead. In other words, Blaine the Mono was preparing to get out of Dodge.

37

ROLAND HEARD A FOOTSTEP behind him as he knelt by Jake and turned, raising his gun. Tilly, her dough-colored face a mask of confusion and superstitious fear, raised her hands and shrieked: "Don't kill me, sai! Please! Don't kill me!"

"Run, then," Roland said curtly, and as Tilly began to move, he struck her calf with the barrel of his revolver. "Not that way—through the door I came in. And if you ever see me again, I'll be the last thing you ever see. Now go!"

She disappeared into the leaping, circling shadows.

Roland dropped his head to Jake's chest, slamming his palm against his other ear to deaden the pulse of the alarm. He heard the boy's heartbeat, slow but strong.

He slipped his arms around the boy, and as he did, Jake's eyes fluttered open.

"You didn't let me fall this time." His voice was no more than a hoarse whisper.

"No. Not this time, and not ever again. Don't try your voice."

"Where's Oy?"

"Oy!" the bumbler barked. "Oy!"

Brandon had slashed Oy several times, but none of the wounds seemed mortal or

even serious. It was clear that he was in some pain, but it was equally clear he was transported with joy. He regarded Jake with sparkling eyes, his pink tongue lolling out. "Ake, Ake, Ake!"

Jake burst into tears and reached for him; Oy limped into the circle of his arms and allowed himself to be hugged for a moment.

Roland got up and looked around. His gaze fixed on the door on the far side of the room. The two men he'd backshot had been heading in that direction, and the woman had also wanted to go that way. The gunslinger went toward the door with Jake in his arms and Oy at his heel. He kicked one of the dead Grays aside, and ducked through. The room beyond was a kitchen. It managed to look like a hog-wallow in spite of the built-in appliances and the stainless steel walls; the Grays were apparently not much interested in housekeeping.

"Drink," Jake whispered. "Please ... so thirsty."

Roland felt a queer doubling, as if time had folded backward on itself. He remembered lurching out of the desert, crazy with the heat and the emptiness. He remembered passing out in the stable of the way station, half-dead from thirst, and waking at the taste of cool water trick-ling down his throat. The boy had taken off his shirt, soaked it under the flow from the pump, and given him to drink. Now it was his turn to do for Jake what Jake had already done for him. Roland glanced around and saw a sink. He went over to it and turned on the faucet. Cold, clear water rushed out. Over them, around them, under them, the alarm roared on and on.

"Can you stand?"

Jake nodded. "I think so."

Roland set the boy on his feet, ready to catch him if he looked too wobbly, but Jake hung onto the sink, then ducked his head beneath the flowing water. Roland picked Oy up and looked at his wounds. They were already clotting. You got off very lucky, my furry friend, Roland thought, then reached past Jake to cup a palmful of water for the animal. Oy drank it eagerly.

Jake drew back from the faucet with his hair plastered to the sides of his face. His skin was still too pale and the signs that he had been badly beaten were clearly visible, but he looked better than he had when Roland had first bent over him. For one terrible moment, the gunslinger had been positive Jake was dead.

He found himself wishing he could go back and kill Gasher again, and that led him to another thought.

"What about the one Gasher called the Tick-Tock Man? Did you see him, Jake?"

"Yes. Oy ambushed him. Tore up his face. Then I shot him."

"Dead?"

Jake's lips began to tremble. He pressed them firmly together. "Yes. In his . . ." He tapped his forehead high above his right eyebrow. "I was l-l- ... I was lucky."

Roland looked at him appraisingly, then slowly shook his head. "You know, I doubt that. But never mind now. Come on."

"Where are we going?" Jake's voice was still little more than a husky murmur, and he kept looking past Roland's shoulder toward the room where he had almost died.

Roland pointed across the kitchen. Beyond another hatchway, the corridor continued. "That'll do for a start."



"GUNSLINGER," a voice boomed from everywhere.

Roland wheeled around, one arm cradling Oy and the other around Jake's shoulders, but there was no one to see.

"Who speaks to me?" he shouted.

"NAME YOURSELF, GUNSLINGER."

"Roland of Gilead, son of Steven. Who speaks to me?"

"GILEAD IS NO MORE," the voice mused, ignoring the question.

Roland looked up and saw patterns of concentric rings in the ceiling. The voice was coming from those.

"NO GUNSLINGER HAS WALKED IN-WORLD OR MID-WORLD FOR ALMOST THREE HUNDRED YEARS."

"I and my friends are the last."

Jake took Oy from Roland. The bumbler at once began to lick the boy's swollen face; his gold-ringed eyes were full of adoration and happiness.

"It's Blaine," Jake whispered to Roland. "Isn't it?"

Roland nodded. Of course it was—but he had an idea that there was a great deal more to Blaine than just a monorail train.

"BOY! ARE YOU JAKE OF NEW YORK?"

Jake pressed closer to Roland and looked up at the speakers. "Yes," he said.

"That's me. Jake of New York. Uh . . . son of Elmer."

"DO YOU STILL HAVE THE BOOK OF RIDDLES? THE ONE OF WHICH I HAVE BEEN TOLD?"

Jake reached over his shoulder, and an expression of dismayed recollection filled his face as his fingers touched nothing but his own back. When he looked at Roland again, the gunslinger was holding his pack out toward him, and although the man's narrow, finely carved face was as expressionless as ever, Jake sensed the ghost of a smile lurking at die corners of his mouth.

"You'll have to fix die straps," Roland said as Jake took the pack. "I made them longer."

"But Riddle-De-Dum!—?"

Roland nodded. "Both books are still in there."

"WHAT YOU GOT, LITTLE PILGRIM?" the voice inquired in a leisurely drawl.

"Gripes!" Jake said.

It can see us as well as hear us, Roland thought, and a moment later he spotted a small glass eye in one corner, far above a man's normal line of sight. He felt a chill slip over his skin, and knew from both the troubled look on Jake's face and the way the boy's arms had tightened around Oy that he wasn't alone in his unease. That voice belonged to a machine, an incredibly smart machine, a playful machine, but there was something very wrong with it, all the same.

"The book," Jake said. "I've got the riddle book."

"GOOD." There was an almost human satisfaction in the voice. "REALLY EXCELLENT."

A scruffy, bearded fellow suddenly appeared in the doorway on the far side of the kitchen. A bloodstained, dirt-streaked yellow scarf flapped from the newcomer's upper arm. "Fires in the walls!" he screamed. In his panic, he seemed not to realize that Roland and Jake were not part of his miserable subterranean ka-tet. "Smoke on the lower levels! People killin theirselves! Somepin's gone wrong! Hell, everythin's gone wrong! We gotta—"

The door of the oven suddenly dropped open like an unhinged jaw. A thick beam of blue-white fire shot out and engulfed the scruffy man's head. He was driven backward with his clothes in flames and his skin boiling on his face.

Jake stared up at Roland, stunned and horrified. Roland put an arm about the

boy's shoulders.

"HE INTERRUPTED ME," the voice said. "THAT WAS RUDE, WASN'T IT?"

"Yes," Roland said calmly. "Extremely rude."

"SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK SAYS YOU HAVE A GREAT MANY RIDDLES BY HEART, ROLAND OF GILEAD. IS THIS TRUE?"

"Yes."

There was an explosion in one of the rooms opening off this arm of the corridor; the floor shuddered beneath their feet and voices screamed in a jagged chorus.

The pulsing lights and the endless, blating siren faded momentarily, then came back strong. A little skein of bitter, acrid smoke drifted from the ventilators.

Oy got a whiff and sneezed.

"TELL ME ONE OF YOUR RIDDLES, GUNSLINGER," the voice invited. It was serene and untroubled, as if they were all sitting together in a peaceful village square somewhere instead of beneath a city that seemed on the verge of ripping itself apart.

Roland thought for a moment, and what came to mind was Cuthbert's favorite riddle. "All right, Blaine," he said, "I will. What's better than all the gods and worse than Old Man Splitfoot? Dead people eat it always; live people who eat it die slow."

There was a long pause. Jake put his face in Oy's fur to try to get away from the stink of the roasted Gray.

"Be careful, gunslinger." The voice was as small as a cool puff of breeze on summer's hottest day. The voice of the machine had come from all the speakers, but this one came only from the speaker directly overhead. "Be careful, Jake of New York. Remember that these are The Drawers. Go slow and be very careful." Jake looked at the gunslinger with widening eyes. Roland gave his head a small, faint shake and raised one finger. He looked as if he was scratching the side of his nose, but that finger also lay across his lips, and Jake had an idea Roland was actually telling him to keep his mouth shut.

"A CLEVER RIDDLE," Blaine said at last. There seemed to be real admiration in its voice. "THE ANSWER IS NOTHING, IS IT NOT?"

"That's right," Roland said. "You're pretty clever yourself, Blaine."

When the voice spoke again, Roland heard what Eddie had heard already: a deep and ungovernable greed. "ASK ME ANOTHER."

Roland drew a deep breath. "Not just now."

"I HOPE YOU ARE NOT REFUSING ME, ROLAND, SON OF STEVEN, FOR THAT IS ALSO RUDE. EXTREMELY RUDE."

"Take us to our friends and help us get out of Lud," Roland said. "Then there may be time for riddling."

"I COULD KILL YOU WHERE YOU STAND," the voice said, and now it was as cold as winter's darkest day.

"Yes," Roland said. "I'm sure you could. But the riddles would die with us."

"I COULD TAKE THE BOY'S BOOK."

"Thieving is ruder than either refusal or interruption," Roland remarked. He spoke as if merely passing the time of day, but the remaining fingers of his right hand were tight on Jake's shoulder.

"Besides," Jake said, looking up at the speaker in the ceiling, "the answers aren't in the book. Those pages were torn out." In a flash of inspiration, he tapped his temple. "They're up here, though."

"YOU FELLOWS WANT TO REMEMBER THAT NOBODY LOVES A SMARTASS," Blaine said. There was another explosion, this one louder and closer. One of the ventilator grilles blew off and shot across the kitchen like a projectile. A moment later two men and a woman emerged through the door which led to the rest of the Grays' warren. The gunslinger levelled his revolver at them, then lowered it as they stumbled across the kitchen and into the silo beyond without so much as a look at Roland and Jake. To Roland they looked like animals fleeing before a forest fire. A stainless steel panel in the ceiling slid open, revealing a square of darkness. Something silvery flashed within it, and a few moments later a steel sphere, perhaps a foot in diameter, dropped from the hole and hung in the air of the kitchen.

"FOLLOW," Blaine said flatly.

"Will it take us to Eddie and Susannah?" Jake asked hopefully.

Blaine replied only with silence . . . but when the sphere began floating down the corridor, Roland and Jake followed it.

38

JAKE HAD NO CLEAR memory of the time which followed, and that was probably merciful. He had left his world over a year before nine hundred people would commit suicide together in a small South American country called Gyana, but he knew about the periodic death-rushes of the lem-mings, and what was happening in the disintegrating undercity of the Grays was like that.

There were explosions, some on their level but most far below them; acrid smoke occasionally drifted from the ventilator grilles, but most of the air-purifiers were still working and they whipped the worst of it away before it could gather in choking clouds. They saw no fires. Yet the Grays were reacting as if the time of the apocalypse had come. Most only fled, their faces blank O's of panic, but many had committed suicide in the halls and interconnected rooms through which the steel sphere led Roland and Jake. Some had shot themselves; many more had slashed their throats or wrists; a few appeared to have swallowed poison. On all the faces of the dead was the same expression of overmastering terror. Jake could only vaguely understand what had driven them to this. Roland had a better idea of what had happened to them—to their minds—when the long-dead city first came to life around them and then seemed to commence tearing itself apart. And it was Roland who understood that Blaine was doing it on purpose. That Blaine was driving them to it.

They ducked around a man hanging from an overhead heating-duct and pounded down a flight of steel stairs behind the floating steel ball.

"Jake!" Roland shouted. "You never let me in at all, did you?"

Jake shook his head.

"I didn't think so. It was Blaine."

They reached the bottom of the stairs and hurried along a narrow corridor toward a hatch with the words ABSOLUTELY NO ADMITTANCE printed on it in the spiked letters of the High Speech.

"Is it Blaine?" Jake asked.

"Yes—that's as good a name as any."

"What about the other v—"

"Hush!" Roland said grimly.

The steel ball paused in front of the hatchway. The wheel spun and the hatch popped ajar. Roland pulled it open, and they stepped into a huge underground room which stretched away in three directions as far as they could see. It was filled with seemingly endless aisles of control panels and electronic equipment. Most of the panels were still dark and dead, but as Jake and Roland stood inside the door, looking about with wide eyes, they could see pilot-lights coming on and hear machinery cycling up.

"The Tick-Tock Man said there were thousands of computers," Jake said. "I guess he was right. My God, look!"

Roland did not understand the word Jake had used and so said nothing. He only watched as row after row of panels lit up. A cloud of sparks and a momentary tongue of green fire jumped from one of the consoles as some ancient piece of equipment malfunctioned.

Most of the machinery, however, appeared to be up and running just fine. Needles which hadn't moved in centuries suddenly jumped into the green. Huge aluminum cylinders spun, spilling data stored on silicon chips into memory banks which were once more wide awake and ready for input. Digital displays, indicating everything from the mean aquifer water-pressure in the West River Barony to available power amperage in the hibernating Send Basin Nuclear Plant, lit up in brilliant dot-matrices of red and green. Overhead, banks of hanging globes began to flash on, radiating outward in spokes of light. And from below, above, and around them—from everywhere—came the deep bass hum of generators and slo-trans engines awakening from their long sleep.

Juke had begun to flag badly. Roland swept him into his arms again and chased the steel ball past machines at whose function and intent he could not even guess. Oy ran at his heels. The ball banked left, and the aisle in which they now found themselves ran between banks of TV monitors, thousands of them, stacked in rows like a child's building blocks.

My dad would love it, Jake thought.

Some sections of this vast video arcade were still dark, but many of the screens were on. They showed a, city in chaos, both above and below. Clumps of Pubes surged pointlessly through the streets, eyes wide, mouths moving soundlessly. Many were leaping from the tall buildings. Jake observed with horror that hundreds more had congregated at the Send Bridge and were throwing themselves into the river. Other screens showed large, cot-filled rooms like dormitories. Some of these rooms were on fire, but the panic-stricken Grays seemed to be setting the fires themselves—torching their own mattresses and furniture for God alone knew what reason.

One screen showed a barrel-chested giant tossing men and women into what looked like a blood-spattered stamping press. This was bad enough, but there was something worse: the victims were standing in an unguarded line, docilely waiting their turns. The executioner, his yellow scarf pulled tight over his skull and the knotted ends swinging below his ears like pigtails, seized an old woman and held her up, waiting patiently for the stainless steel block of metal to clear the killing floor so he could toss her in. The old woman did not struggle; seemed, in fact, to be smiling.

"IN THE ROOMS THE PEOPLE COME AND GO," Blaine said, "BUT I DON'T THINK ANY OF

THEM ARE TALKING OF MICHELANGELO." He suddenly laughed—strange, tittery laughter that sounded like rats scampering over broken glass. The sound sent chills chasing up Jake's neck. He wanted nothing at all to do with an intelligence that laughed like that . . . but what choice did they have?

He turned his gaze helplessly back to the monitors . . . and Roland at once turned his head away. He did this gently but firmly. "There's nothing there you need to look at, Jake," he said.

"But why are they doing it?" Jake asked. He had eaten nothing all day, but he still felt like vomiting. "Why?"

"Because they're frightened, and Blaine is feeding their fear. But mostly, I think, because they've lived too long in the graveyard of their grandfathers and they're tired of it. And before you pity them, remember how happy they would have been to take you along with them into the clearing where the path ends."

The steel ball zipped around another corner, leaving the TV screens and electronic monitoring equipment behind. Ahead, a wide ribbon of some synthetic stuff was set into the floor. It gleamed like fresh tar between two narrow strips of chrome steel that dwindled to a point on what was not the far side of this room, but its horizon.

The ball bounced impatiently above the dark strip, and suddenly the belt—for that was what it was—swept into silent motion, trundling along between its steel facings at jogging speed. The ball made small arcs in the air, urging them to climb on.

Roland trotted beside the moving strip until he was roughly match-ing its speed, then did just that. He set Jake down and the three of them—gunslinger, boy, and golden-eyed bumbler—were carried rapidly across this shadowy underground plain where the ancient machines were awakening. The moving strip carried them into an area of what looked like filing cabinets—row after endless row of them. They were dark . . . but not dead. A low, sleepy humming sound came from within them, and Jake could see hairline cracks of bright yellow light shining between the steel panels.

He suddenly found himself thinking of the Tick-Tock Man.

There's maybe a hundred thousand of those ever-fucking dipolar computers under the ever-fucking city! I want those computers!

Well, Jake thought, they're waking up, so I guess you're getting what you wanted, Ticky . . . but if you were here, I'm not sure you'd still want it.

Then he remembered Tick-Tock's great-grandfather, who'd been brave enough to climb into an airplane from another world and take it into the sky. With that kind of blood running in his veins, Jake supposed, Tick-Tock, far from being frightened to the point of suicide, would have been delighted by this turn of events . . . and the more people who killed themselves in terror, the happier he would have been.

Too late now, Ticky, he thought. Thank God.

Roland spoke in a soft, wondering voice. "All these boxes ... I think we're riding through the mind of the thing that calls itself Blaine, Jake. / think we're riding through its mind."

Jake nodded, and found himself thinking of his Final Essay. "Blaine the Brain is a hell of a pain."

"Yes."

Jake looked closely at Roland. "Are we going to come out where I think we're

going to come out?"

"Yes," Roland said. "If we're still following the Path of the Beam, we'll come out in the Cradle."

Jake nodded. "Roland?"

"What?"

"Thanks for coming after me."

Roland nodded and put an arm around Jake's shoulders.

Far ahead of them, huge motors rumbled to life. A moment later a heavy grinding sound began and new light—the harsh glow of orange arc-sodiums—flooded down on them. Jake could now see the place where the moving belt stopped. Beyond it was a steep, narrow escalator, leading up into that orange light.

39

EDDIE AND SUSANNAH HEARD heavy motors start up almost directly beneath them. A moment later, a wide strip of the marble floor began to pull slowly back, revealing a long lighted slot below. The floor was disappearing in their direction. Eddie seized the handles of Susannah's chair and rolled it rapidly backward along the steel barrier between the monorail platform and the rest of the Cradle. There were several pillars along the course of the growing rectangle of light, and Eddie waited for them to tumble into the hole as the floor upon which they stood disappeared from beneath their bases. It didn't happen. The pillars went on serenely standing, seeming to float on nothing.

"I see an escalator!" Susannah shouted over the endless, pulsing alarm. She was leaning forward, peering into the hole.

"Uh-huh," Eddie shouted back. "We got the el station up here, so it must be notions, perfume, and ladies' lingerie down there."

"What?"

"Never mind!"

"Eddie!" Susannah screamed. Delighted surprise burst over her face like a Fourth of July firework. She leaned even further forward, pointing, and Eddie had to grab her to keep her from tumbling out of the chair. "It's Roland! It's both of them!"

There was a shuddery thump as the slot in the floor opened to its maximum length and stopped. The motors which had driven it along its hidden tracks cut out in a long, dying whine. Eddie ran to the edge of the hole and saw Roland riding on one of the escalator steps. Jake—white-faced, bruised, bloody, but clearly Jake and clearly alive—was standing next to him and leaning on the gunslinger's shoulder. And sitting on the step right behind them, looking up with his bright eyes was Oy.

"Roland! Jake!" Eddie shouted. He leaped up, waving his hands over his head, and came down dancing on the edge of the slot. If he had been wearing a hat, he would have thrown it in the air.

They looked up and waved. Jake was grinning, Eddie saw, and even old long tall and ugly looked as if he might break down and crack a smile before long.

Wonders, Eddie thought, would never cease. His heart suddenly felt too big for his chest and he danced faster, waving his arms and whooping, afraid that if he didn't keep moving, his joy and relief might actually cause him to burst. Until this moment he had not realized how positive his heart had become that they

would never see Roland and Jake again.

"Hey, guys! All RIGHT! Far fucking out! Get your asses up here!"

"Eddie, help me!"

He turned. Susannah was trying to struggle out of her chair, but a fold of the deerskin trousers she was wearing had gotten caught in the brake mechanism. She was laughing and weeping at the same time, her dark eyes blazing with happiness. Eddie lifted her from the chair so violently that it crashed over on its side. He danced her around in a circle. She clung to his neck with one hand and waved strenuously with the other.

"Roland! Jake! Get on up here! Shuck your butts, you hear me?"

When they reached the top, Eddie embraced Roland, pounding him on the back while Susannah covered Jake's upturned, laughing face with kisses. Oy ran around in tight figure eights, barking shrilly.

"Sugar!" Susannah said. "You all right?"

"Yes," Jake said. He was still grinning, but tears stood in his eyes. "And glad to be here. You'll never know how glad."

"I can guess, sugar. You c'n bet on that." She turned to look at Roland. "What'd they do to him? His face look like somebody run over it with a bulldozer."

"That was mostly Gasher," Roland said. "He won't be bothering Jake again. Or anyone else."

"What about you, big boy? You all right?"

Roland nodded, looking about. "So this is the Cradle."

"Yes," Eddie said. He was peering into the slot. "What's down there?"

"Machines and madness."

"Loquacious as ever, I see." Eddie looked at Roland, smiling. "Do you know how happy I am to see you, man? Do you have any idea?"

"Yes—I think I do." Roland smiled then, thinking of how people changed. There had been a time, and not so long ago, when Eddie had been on the edge of cutting his throat with the gunslinger's own knife.

The engines below them started up again. The escalator came to a stop. The slot in the floor began to slide closed once more. Jake went to Susannah's overturned chair, and as he was righting it, he caught sight of the smooth pink shape beyond the iron bars. His breath stopped, and the dream he had had after leaving River Crossing returned full force: the vast pink bullet shape slicing across the empty lands of western Mis-souri toward him and Oy. Two big triangular windows glittering high up in the blank face of that oncoming monster, windows like eyes . . . and now his dream was becoming reality, just as he had known it eventually would.

It's just an awful choo-choo train, and its name is Blaine the Pain.

Eddie walked over and slung an arm around Jake's shoulders. "Well, there it is, champ—just as advertised. What do you think of it?"

"Not too much, actually." This was an understatement of colossal size, but Jake was too drained to do any better.

"Me, either," Eddie said. "It talks. And it likes riddles."

Jake nodded.

Roland had Susannah planted on one hip, and together they were examining the control box with its diamond-pattern of raised number-pads. Jake and Eddie joined them. Eddie found he had to keep looking down at Jake in order to verify that it wasn't just his imagination or wishful thinking; the boy was really

here.

"What now?" he asked Roland.

Roland slipped his finger lightly over the numbered buttons which made up the diamond shape and shook his head. He didn't know.

"Because I think the mono's engines are cycling faster," Eddie said. "I mean, it's hard to tell for sure with that alarm blating, but I think it is ... and it's a robot, after all. What if it, like, leaves without us?"

"Blaine!" Susannah shouted. "Blaine, are you—"

"LISTEN CLOSELY, MY FRIENDS," Blaine's voice boomed. "THERE ARE LARGE STOCKPILES OF CHEMICAL AND BIO-LOGICAL WARFARE CANNISTERS UNDER THE CITY. I HAVE STARTED A SEQUENCE WHICH WILL CAUSE AN EXPLOSION AND RELEASE THIS GAS. THIS EXPLOSION WILL OCCUR IN TWELVE MINUTES."

The voice fell silent for a moment, and then the voice of Little Blaine, almost buried by the steady, pulsing whoop of the alarm, came to them: ". . . / was afraid of something like this . . . you must hurry ..."

Eddie ignored Little Blaine, who wasn't telling him a damned thing he didn't already know. Of course they had to hurry, but that fact was running a distant second at the moment. Something much larger occupied most of his mind. "Why?" he asked. "Why in God's name would you do that?"

"I SHOULD THINK IT OBVIOUS. I CAN'T NUKE THE CITY WITHOUT DESTROYING MYSELF, AS WELL. AND HOW COULD I TAKE YOU WHERE YOU WANT TO GO IF I WERE DESTROYED?"

"But there are still thousands of people in the city," Eddie said. "You'll kill them."

"YES," Blaine said calmly. "SEE YOU LATER ALLIGATOR, AFTER A WHILE CROCODILE, DON'T FORGET TO WRITE."

"Why?" Susannah shouted. "Why, goddam you?"

"BECAUSE THEY BORE ME. YOU FOUR, HOWEVER, I FIND RATHER INTERESTING. OF COURSE, HOW LONG I CONTINUE TO FIND YOU INTERESTING WILL DEPEND ON HOW GOOD YOUR RIDDLES ARE. AND SPEAKING OF RIDDLES, HADN'T YOU BETTER GET TO WORK SOLVING MINE? YOU HAVE EXACTLY ELEVEN MINUTES AND TWENTY SECONDS BEFORE THE CANNISTERS RUPTURE."

"Stop it!" Jake yelled over the blating siren. "It isn't just the city— gas like that could float anywhere! It could even kill the old people in River Crossing!"

"TOUGH TITTY, SAID THE KITTY," Blaine responded unfeelingly. "ALTHOUGH I BELIEVE THEY CAN COUNT ON MEASURING OUT THEIR LIVES IN COFFEE-SPOONS FOR A FEW MORE YEARS; THE AUTUMN STORMS HAVE BEGUN, AND THE PRE-VAILING WINDS WILL CARRY THE GASES AWAY FROM THEM. THE SITUATION OF YOU FOUR IS, HOWEVER, VERY DIFFERENT. YOU BETTER PUT ON YOUR THINKING CAPS, OR IT'S SEE YOU LATER ALLIGATOR, AFTER A WHILE CROCODILE, DON'T FORGET TO WRITE." The voice paused.

"ONE PIECE OF ADDITIONAL INPUT: THIS GAS IS NOT PAINLESS."

"Take it back!" Jake said. "We'll still tell you riddles, won't we, Roland? We'll tell all the riddles you want! Just take it back!"

Blaine began to laugh. He laughed for a long time, peeling shrieks of electronic mirth into the wide empty space of the Cradle, where it mingled with the monotonous, drilling beat of the alarm.

"Stop it!" Susannah shouted. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"

Blaine did. A moment later the alarm cut off in mid-blatt. The ensuing silence—broken only by the pounding rain—was deafening.

Now the voice issuing from the speaker was very soft, thoughtful, and utterly



without mercy. "YOU NOW HAVE TEN MINUTES," Blaine said. "LET'S SEE JUST HOW INTERESTING YOU REALLY ARE."

40

"ANDREW."

There is no Andrew here, stranger, he thought. Andrew is long gone; Andrew is no more, as I shall soon be no more.

"Andrew!" the voice insisted.

It came from far away. It came from outside the cider-press that had once been his head.

Once there had been a boy named Andrew, and his father had taken that boy to a park on the far western side of Lud, a park where there had been apple trees and a rusty tin shack that looked like hell and smelled like heaven. In answer to his question, Andrew's father had told him it was called the cider house. Then he gave Andrew a pat on the head, told him not to be afraid, and led him through the blanket-covered doorway.

There had been more apples—baskets and baskets of them—stacked against the walls inside, and there had also been a scrawny old man named Dewlap, whose muscles writhed beneath his white skin like worms and whose job was to feed the apples, basket by basket, to the loose-jointed, clanking machine which stood in the middle of the room. What came out of the pipe jutting from the far end of the machine was sweet cider. Another man (he no longer remembered what this one's name might have been) stood there, his job to fill jug after jug with the cider. A third man stood behind him, and his job was to clout the jug-filler on the head if there was too much spillage.

Andrew's father had given him a glass of the foaming cider, and although he had tasted a great many forgotten delicacies during his years in the city, he had never tasted anything finer than that sweet, cold drink. It had been like swallowing a gust of October wind. Yet what he remembered even more clearly than the taste of the cider or the wormy shift and squiggle of Dewlap's muscles as he dumped the baskets was the merciless way the machine reduced the big red-gold apples to liquid. Two dozen rollers had carried them beneath a revolving steel drum with holes punched in it. The apples had first been squeezed and then actually popped, spilling their juices down an inclined trough while a screen caught the seeds and pulp.

Now his head was the cider-press and his brains were the apples. Soon they would pop as the apples had popped beneath the roller, and the blessed darkness would swallow him.

"Andrew! Raise your head and look at me."

He couldn't . . . and wouldn't even if he could. Better to just lie here and wait for the darkness. He was supposed to be dead, anyway; hadn't the hellish squint put a bullet in his brain?

"It didn't go anywhere near your brain, you horse's ass, and you're not dying. You've just got a headache. You will die, though, if you don't stop lying there and puling in your own blood . . . and I will make sure, Andrew, that your dying makes what you are feeling now seem like bliss."

It was not the threats which caused the man on the floor to raise his head but rather the way the owner of that penetrating, hissing voice seemed to have read

his mind. His head came up slowly, and the agony was excruciating—heavy objects seemed to go sliding and careering around the bony case which contained what was left of his mind, ripping bloody channels through his brain as they went. A long, syrupy moan escaped him. There was a flapping, tickling sensation on his right cheek, as if a dozen flies were crawling in the blood there. He wanted to shoo them away, but he knew that he needed both hands just to support himself. The figure standing on the far side of the room by the hatch which led to the kitchen looked ghastly, unreal. This was partly because the overhead lights were still strobing, partly because he was seeing the new-comer with only one eye (he couldn't remember what had happened to the other and didn't want to), but he had an idea it was mostly because the creature was ghastly and unreal. It looked like a man . . . but the fellow who had once been Andrew Quick had an idea it really wasn't a man at all.

The stranger standing in front of the hatch wore a short, dark jacket belted at the waist, faded denim trousers, and old, dusty boots—the boots of a countryman, a range-rider, or—

"Or a gunslinger, Andrew?" the stranger asked, and tittered.

The Tick-Tock Man stared desperately at the figure in the doorway, trying to see the face, but the short jacket had a hood, and it was up. The stranger's countenance was lost in its shadows.

The siren stopped in mid-whoop. The emergency lights stayed on, but they at least stopped flashing.

"There," the stranger said in his—or its—whispery, penetrating voice. "At last we can hear ourselves think."

"Who are you?" the Tick-Tock Man asked. He moved slightly, and more of those weights went sliding through his head, ripping fresh channels in his brain. As terrible as that feeling was, the awful tickling of the flies on his right cheek was somehow worse.

"I'm a man of many handles, pardner," the man said from inside the darkness of his hood, and although his voice was grave, Tick-Tock heard laughter lurking just below the surface. "There's some that call me Jimmy, and some that call me Timmy; some that call me Handy and some that call me Dandy. They can call me Loser, or they can call me Winner, just as long as they don't call me in too late for dinner."

The man in the doorway threw back his head, and his laughter chilled the skin of the wounded man's arms and back into lumps of gooseflesh; it was like the howl of a wolf.

"I have been called the Ageless Stranger," the man said. He began to walk toward Tick-Tock, and as he did, the man on the floor moaned and tried to scabble backward. "I have also been called Merlin or Maerlyn—and who cares, because I was never that one, although I never denied it, either. I am sometimes called the Magician . . . or the Wizard . . . but I hope we can go forward together on more humble terms, Andrew. More human terms."

He pushed back the hood, revealing a fair, broad-browed face that was not, for all its pleasant looks, in any way human. Large hectic roses rode the Wizard's cheekbones; his blue-green eyes sparkled with a gusty joy far too wild to be sane; his blue-black hair stood up in zany clumps like the feathers of a raven; his lips, lushly red, parted to reveal the teeth of a cannibal.

"Call me Fannin," the grinning apparition said. "Richard Fannin. That's not

exactly right, maybe, but I reckon it's close enough for government work." He held out a hand whose palm was utterly devoid of lines. "What do you say, pard? Shake the hand that shook the world."

The creature who had once been Andrew Quick and who had been known in the halls of the Grays as the Tick-Tock Man shrieked and again tried to wriggle backward. The flap of scalp peeled loose by the low-caliber bullet which had only grooved his skull instead of penetrating it swung back and forth; the long strands of gray-blond hair continued to tickle against his cheek. Quick, however, no longer felt it. He had even forgotten the ache in his skull and the throb from the socket where his left eye had been. His entire consciousness had fused into one thought: I must get away from this beast that looks like a man.

But when the stranger seized his right hand and shook it that thought passed like a dream on waking. The scream which had been locked in Quick's breast escaped his lips in a lover's sigh. He stared dumbly up at the grinning newcomer. The loose flap of his scalp swung and dangled.

"Is that bothering you? It must be. Here!" Fannin seized the hanging flap and ripped it briskly off Quick's head, revealing a bleary swatch of skull. There was a noise like heavy cloth tearing. Quick shrieked.

"There, there, it only hurts for a second." The man was now squatting on his hunkers before Quick and speaking as an indulgent parent might speak to a child with a splinter in his finger. "Isn't that so?"

"Y-Y-Yes," Quick muttered. And it was. Already the pain was fading. And when Fannin reached toward him again, caressing the left side of his face, Quick's jerk backward was only a reflex, quickly mastered. As the lineless hand stroked, he felt strength flowing back into him. He looked up at the newcomer with dumb gratitude, lips quivering.

"Is that better, Andrew? It is, isn't it?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"If you want to thank me—as I'm sure you do—you must say something an old acquaintance of mine used to say. He ended up betraying me, but he was a good friend for quite some time, anyway, and I still have a soft spot in my heart for him. Say, 'My life for you,' Andrew—can you say that?"

He could and he did; in fact, it seemed he couldn't stop saying it. "My life for you! My life for you! My life for you! My life—"

The stranger touched his cheek again, but this time a huge raw bolt of pain blasted across Andrew Quick's head. He screamed.

"Sorry about that, but time is short and you were starting to sound like a broken record. Andrew, let me put it to you with no bark on it: how would you like to kill the squint who shot you? Not to mention his friends and the hardcase who brought him here—him, most of all. Even the mutt that took your eye, Andrew—would you like that?"

"Yes!" the former Tick-Tock Man gasped. His hands clenched into bloody fists.

"Yes!"

"That's good," the stranger said, and helped Quick to his feet, "because they have to die—they're meddling with things they have no business meddling with. I expected Blaine to take care of them, but things have gone much too far to depend on anything . . . after all, who would have thought they could get as far as they have?"

"I don't know," Quick said. He did not, in fact, have the slightest idea what

the stranger was talking about. Nor did he care; there was a feeling of exaltation creeping through his mind like some excellent drug, and after the pain of the cider-press, that was enough for him. More than enough.

Richard Fannin's lips curled. "Bear and bone . . . key and rose . . . day and night . . . time and tide. Enough! Enough, I say! They must not draw closer to the Tower than they are now!"

Quick staggered backward as the man's hands shot out with the flickery speed of heat lightning. One broke the chain which held the tiny glass-enclosed pendulum clock; the other stripped Jake Chambers's Seiko from his forearm.

"I'll just take these, shall I?" Fannin the Wizard smiled charmingly, his lips modestly closed over those awful teeth. "Or do you object?"

"No," Quick said, surrendering the last symbols of his long leadership without a qualm (without, in fact, even being aware that he was doing so). "Be my guest."

"Thank you, Andrew," the dark man said softly. "Now we must step lively—I'm expecting a drastic change in the atmosphere of these environs in the next five minutes or so. We must get to the nearest closet where gas masks are stored before that happens, and it's apt to be a near thing. I could survive the change quite nicely, but I'm afraid you might have some difficulties."

"I don't understand what you're talking about," Andrew Quick said. His head had begun to throb again, and his mind was whirling.

"Nor do you need to," the stranger said smoothly. "Come, Andrew— I think we should hurry. Busy, busy day, eh? With luck, Blaine will fry them right on the platform, where they are no doubt still standing—he's become very eccentric over the years, poor fellow. But I think we should hurry, just the same."

He slid his arm over Quick's shoulders and, giggling, led him through the hatchway Roland and Jake had used only a few minutes before.

•VI•

RIDDLE AND  
WASTE LANDS

1

"ALL RIGHT," ROLAND SAID. "Tell me his riddle."

"What about all the people out there?" Eddie asked, pointing across the wide, pillared Plaza of the Cradle and toward the city beyond. "What can we do for them?"

"Nothing," Roland said, "but it's still possible that we may be able to do something for ourselves. Now what was the riddle?"

Eddie looked toward the streamlined shape of the mono. "He said we'd have to prime the pump to get him going. Only his pump primes backward. Does it mean anything to you?"

Roland thought it over carefully, then shook his head. He looked down at Jake. "Any ideas, Jake?"

Jake shook his head. "I don't even see a pump."

"That's probably the easy part," Roland said. "We say he and him instead of it and that because Blaine sounds like a living being, but he's still a machine—& sophisticated one, but a machine. He started his own engines, but it must take some sort of code or combination to open the gate and the train doors."

"We better hurry up," Jake said nervously. "It's got to be two or three minutes since he last talked to us. At least."

"Don't count on it," Eddie said gloomily. "Time's weird over here."

"Still—"

"Yeah, yeah." Eddie glanced toward Susannah, but she was sitting astride Roland's hip and looking at the numeric diamond with a day-dreamy expression on her face. He looked back at Roland. "I'm pretty sure you're right about it being a combination—that must be what all those number-pads are for." He raised his voice. "Is that it, Blaine? Have we got at least that much right?"

No response; only the quickening rumble of the mono's engines.

"Roland," Susannah said abruptly. "You have to help me."

The daydreamy look was being replaced by an expression of mingled horror, dismay, and determination. To Roland's eye, she had never looked more beautiful ... or more alone. She had been on his shoulders when they stood at the edge of the clearing and watched the bear trying to claw Eddie out of the tree, and Roland had not seen her expression when he told her she must be the one to shoot it. But he knew what that expression had been, for he was seeing it now. Ka was

a wheel, its one purpose to turn, and in the end it always came back to the place where it had started. So it had ever been and so it was now; Susannah was once again facing the bear, and her face said she knew it.

"What?" he asked. "What is it, Susannah?"

"I know the answer, but I can't get it. It's stuck in my mind the way a fishbone can get stuck in your throat. I need you to help me remember. Not his face, but his voice. What he said."

Jake glanced down at his wrist and was surprised all over again by a memory of the Tick-Tock Man's catlike green eyes when he saw not his watch but only the place where it had been—a white shape outlined by his deeply tanned skin. How much longer did they have? Surely no more than seven minutes, and that was being generous. He looked up and saw that Roland had removed a cartridge from his gunbelt and was walking it back and forth across the knuckles of his left hand. Jake felt his eyelids immediately grow heavy and looked away, fast.

"What voice would you remember, Susannah Dean?" Roland asked in a low, musing voice. His eyes were not fixed on her face but on the cartridge as it did its endless, limber dance across his knuckles . . . and back . . . across . . . and back . . .

He didn't need to look up to know that Jake had looked away from the dance of the cartridge and Susannah had not. He began to speed it up until the cartridge almost seemed to be floating above the back of his hand.

"Help me remember the voice of my father," Susannah Dean said.

2  
FOR A MOMENT THERE was silence except for a distant, crumping explosion in the city, the rain pounding on the roof of the Cradle, and the fat throb of the monorail's slo-trans engines. Then a low-pitched hydraulic hum cut through the air. Eddie looked away from the cartridge dancing across the gunslinger's fingers (it took an effort; he realized that in another few moments he would have been hypnotized himself) and peered through the iron bars. A slim silver rod was pushing itself up from the sloping pink surface between Blaine's forward windows. It looked like an antenna of some kind.

"Susannah?" Roland asked in that same low voice.

"What?" Her eyes were open but her voice was distant and breathy—the voice of someone who is sleeptalking.

"Do you remember the voice of your father?"

"Yes . . . but I can't hear it."

"SIX MINUTES, MY FRIENDS."

Eddie and Jake started and looked toward the control-box speaker, but Susannah seemed not to have heard at all; she only stared at the floating cartridge.

Below it, Roland's knuckles rippled up and down like the heddles of a loom.

"Try, \_Susannah," Roland urged, and suddenly he felt Susannah change within the circle of his right arm. She seemed to gain weight . . . and, in some indefinable way, vitality as well. It was as if her essence had somehow changed. And it had.

"Why you want to bother wit dot bitch?" the raspy voice of Detta Walker asked.

DETTA SOUNDED BOTH EXASPERATED and amused. "She never got no better'n a C in math her whole life. Wouldn'ta got dat widout me to he'p her." She paused, then added grudgingly: "An' Daddy. He he'ped some, too. I knowed about them forspecial numbahs, but was him showed us de net. My, I got de bigges' kick outta dat!" She chuckled. "Reason Suze can't remember is 'cause Odetta never understood 'bout dem forspecial numbers in de firs' place."

"What forspecial numbers?" Eddie asked.

"Prime numbahs!" She pronounced the word prime in a way that almost rhymed with calm. She looked at Roland, appearing to be wholly awake again now . . . except she was not Susannah, nor was she the same wretched, devilish creature who had previously gone under the name of Detta Walker, although she sounded the same. "She went to Daddy cryin an' carryin on 'cause she was flunkin dat math course . . . and it wasn't nuthin but funnybook algebra at dat! She could do de woik—if I could, she could—but she din' want to. Poitry-readin bitch like her too good for a little ars mathematica, you see?" Detta threw her head back and laughed, but the poisoned, half-mad bitterness was gone from the sound. She seemed genuinely amused at the foolishness of her mental twin.

"And Daddy, he say, Tm goan show you a trick, Odetta. I learned it in college. It he'ped me get through this prime numbah bi'ness, and it's goan he'p you, too. He'p you find mos' any prime numbah you want.' Oh-detta, dumb as ever, she say, 'Teacher says ain't no formula for prime numbahs, Daddy.' And Daddy, he say right back, 'They ain't. But you can catch em, Odetta, if you have a net.' He called it The Net of Eratos-thenes. Take me over to dat box on the wall, Roland—I'm goan answer dat honkey computer's riddle. I'm goan th'ow you a net and catch you a train-ride."

Roland took her over, closely followed by Eddie, Jake, and Oy.

"Gimme dat piece o cha'coal you keep in yo' poke."

He rummaged and brought out a short stub of blackened stick. Detta took it and peered at the diamond-shaped grid of numbers. "Ain't zackly de way Daddy showed me, but I reckon it comes to de same," she said after a moment. "Prime numbah be like me—ornery and forspecial. It gotta be a numbah don't newah divide even 'ceptin by one and its own-self. Two is prime, 'cause you can divide it by one an' two, but it's the only even numbah that's prime. You c'n take out all the res' dat's even."

"I'm lost," Eddie said.

"That's 'cause you just a stupid white boy," Detta said, but not unkindly. She looked closely at the diamond shape a moment longer, then quickly began to touch the tip of the charcoal to all the even-numbered pads, leaving small black smudges on them.

"Three's prime, but no product you git by multiplyin three can be prime," she said, and now Roland heard an odd but wonderful thing: Detta was fading out of the woman's voice; she was being replaced not by Odetta Holmes but by Susannah Dean. He would not have to bring her out of this trance; she was coming out of it on her own, quite naturally.

Susannah began using her charcoal to touch the multiples of three which were left now that the even numbers had been eliminated: nine, fifteen, twenty-one, and so on.

"Same with five and seven," she murmured, and suddenly she was awake and all

Susannah Dean again. "You just have to mark the odd ones like twenty-five that haven't been crossed out already." The diamond shape on the control box now looked like this:

"There," she said tiredly. "What's left in the net are all the prime numbers between one and one hundred. I'm pretty sure that's the combination that opens the gate."

**"YOU HAVE ONE MINUTE, MY FRIENDS. YOU ARE PROVING TO BE A GOOD DEAL THICKER THAN I HAD HOPED YOU WOULD BE."**

Eddie ignored Blame's voice and threw his arms around Susannah. "Are you back, Suze? Are you awake?"

"Yes. I woke up in the middle of what she was saying, but I let her talk a little longer, anyway. It seemed impolite to interrupt." She looked at Roland.

"What do you say? Want to go for it?"

**"FIFTY SECONDS."**

"Yes. You try the combination, Susannah. It's your answer."

She reached out toward the top of the diamond, but Jake put his hand over hers.

"No," he said. "This pump primes backward. Remember?"

She looked startled, then smiled. "That's right. Clever Blaine . . . and clever Jake, too."

They watched in silence as she pushed each number in turn, starting with ninety-seven. There was a minute click as each pad locked down. There was no tension-filled pause after she touched the last button; the gate in the center of the barrier immediately began to slide up on its tracks, rattling harshly and showering down flakes of rust from somewhere high above as it went.

**"NOT BAD AT ALL,"** Blaine said admiringly. **"I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO THIS VERY MUCH. MAY I SUGGEST YOU CLIMB ON BOARD QUICKLY? IN FACT, YOU MAY WISH TO RUN. THERE ARE SEVERAL GAS OUTLETS IN THIS AREA."**

4  
THREE HUMAN BEINGS (one carrying a fourth on his hip) and one small, furry animal ran through the opening in the barrier and sprinted toward Blaine the Mono. It stood humming in its narrow loading bay, half above the platform and half below it, looking like a giant cartridge—one which had been painted an incongruous shade of pink—lying in the open breach of a high-powered rifle. In the vastness of the Cradle, Roland and the others looked like mere moving specks. Above them, flocks of pigeons—now with only forty seconds to live—swooped and swirled beneath the Cradle's ancient roof. As the travellers approached the mono, a curved section of its pink hull slid up, revealing a doorway. Beyond it was thick, pale blue carpeting.

"Welcome to Blaine," a soothing voice said as they pelted aboard. They all recognized that voice; it was a slightly louder, slightly more confident version of Little Blaine. "Praise the Imperium! Please make sure your transit-card is available for collection and remember that false boarding is a serious crime punishable by law. We hope you enjoy your trip. Welcome to Blaine. Praise the Imperium! Please make sure your transit-card—"



The voice suddenly sped up, first becoming the chatter of a human chipmunk and then a high-pitched, gabbly whine. There was a brief electronic curse—BOOP!—and then it cut out entirely.

"I THINK WE CAN DISPENSE WITH THAT BORING OLD SHIT, DON'T YOU?" Blaine asked.

From outside came a tremendous, thudding explosion. Eddie, who was now carrying Susannah, was thrown forward and would have fallen if Roland hadn't caught him by the arm. Until that moment, Eddie had held onto the desperate notion that Blaine's threat about the poison gas was no more than a sick joke. You should have known better, he thought. Anyone who thinks impressions of old movie actors is funny absolutely cannot be trusted. I think it's like a law of nature.

Behind them, the curved section of hull slid back into place with a soft thud.

Air began to hiss gently from hidden vents, and Jake felt his ears pop gently.

"I think he just pressurized the cabin."

Eddie nodded, looking around with wide eyes. "I felt it, too. Look at this place! Wow!"

He had once read of an aviation company—Regent Air, it might have been—that had catered to people who wanted to fly between New York and Los Angeles in a grander style than airlines such as Delta and United allowed for. They had operated a customized 727 complete with drawing room, bar, video lounge, and sleeper compartments. He imagined the interior of that plane must have looked a little like what he was seeing now.

They were standing in a long, tubular room furnished with plush-upholstered swivel chairs and modular sofas. At the far end of the compartment, which had to be at least eighty feet long, was an area that looked not like a bar but a cosy bistro. An instrument that could have been a harpsichord stood on a pedestal of polished wood, highlighted by a hidden baby spotlight. Eddie almost expected Hoagy Carmichael to appear and start tinkling out "Stardust."

Indirect lighting glowed from panels placed high along the walls, and dependent from the ceiling halfway down the compartment was a chandelier. To Jake it looked like a smaller replica of the one which had lain in ruins on the ballroom floor of The Mansion. Nor did this surprise him—he had begun to take such connections and doublings as a matter of course. The only thing about this splendid room which seemed wrong was its lack of even a single window.

The piece de resistance stood on a pedestal below the chandelier. It was an ice-sculpture of a gunslinger with a revolver in his left hand. The right hand was holding the bridle of the ice-horse that walked, head-down and tired, behind him. Eddie could see there were only three digits on this hand: the last two fingers and the thumb.

Jake, Eddie, and Susannah stared in fascination at the haggard face beneath the frozen hat as the floor began to thrum gently beneath their feet. The resemblance to Roland was remarkable.

"I HAD TO WORK RATHER FAST, I'M AFRAID," Blaine said modestly. "DOES IT DO ANYTHING FOR YOU?"

"It's absolutely amazing," Susannah said.

"THANK YOU, SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK."

Eddie was testing one of the sofas with his hand. It was incredibly soft; touching it made him want to sleep for at least sixteen hours. "The Great Old Ones really travelled in style, didn't they?"

Blaine laughed again, and the shrill, not-quite-sane undertone of that laugh

made them look at each other uneasily. "DON'T GET THE WRONG IDEA," Blaine said. "THIS WAS THE BARONY CABIN— WHAT I BELIEVE YOU WOULD CALL FIRST CLASS." "Where are the other cars?"

Blaine ignored the question. Beneath their feet, the throb of the engines continued to speed up. Susannah was reminded of how the pilots revved their engines before charging down the runway at LaGuardia or Idlewild. "PLEASE TAKE YOUR SEATS, MY INTERESTING NEW FRIENDS."

Jake dropped into one of the swivel chairs. Oy jumped promptly into his lap. Roland took the chair nearest him, sparing one glance at the ice-sculpture. The barrel of the revolver was beginning to drip slowly into the shallow china basin in which the sculpture stood.

Eddie sat down on one of the sofas with Susannah. It was every bit as comfortable as his hand had told him it would be. "Exactly where are we going, Blaine?"

Blaine replied in the patient voice of someone who realizes he is speaking to a mental inferior and must make allowances. "ALONG THE PATH OF THE BEAM. AT LEAST, AS FAR ALONG IT AS MY TRACK GOES."

"To the Dark Tower?" Roland asked. Susannah realized it was the first time the gunslinger had actually spoken to the loquacious ghost in the machine below Lud.

"Only as far as Topeka," Jake said in a low voice.

"YES," Blaine said. "TOPEKA IS THE NAME OF MY TERMI-NATING POINT, ALTHOUGH I AM SURPRISED YOU KNOW IT."

With all you know about our world, Jake thought, how come you don't know that some lady wrote a book about you, Blaine? Was it the name-change? Was something that simple enough to fool a complicated machine like you into overlooking your own biography? And what about Beryl Evans, the woman who supposedly wrote Charlie the Choo-Choo? Did you know her, Blaine? And where is she now? Good questions . . . but Jake somehow didn't think this would be a good time to ask them.

The throb of the engines became steadily stronger. A faint thud— not nearly as strong as the explosion which had shaken the Cradle as they boarded—ran through the floor. An expression of alarm crossed Susannah's face. "Oh shit! Eddie! My wheelchair! It's back there!"

Eddie put an arm around her shoulders. "Too late now, babe," he said as Blaine the Mono began to move, sliding toward its slot in the Cradle for the first time in ten years . . . and for the last time in its long, long history.

5

"THE BARONY CABIN HAS A PARTICULARLY FINE VISUAL MODE," Blaine said. "WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO ACTIVATE IT?"

Jake glanced at Roland, who shrugged and nodded.

"Yes, please," Jake said.

What happened then was so spectacular that it stunned all of them to silence...although Roland, who knew little of technology but who had spent his entire life on comfortable terms with magic, was the least wonder-struck of the four. It was not a matter of windows appearing in the compartment's curved walls; the entire cabin—floor and ceiling as well as walls—grew milky, grew translucent, grew transparent, and then disappeared completely. Within a space

of five seconds, Blaine the Mono seemed to be gone and the pilgrims seemed to be zooming through the lanes of the city with no aid or support at all.

Susannah and Eddie clutched each other like small children in the path of a charging animal. Oy barked and tried to jump down the front of Jake's shirt. Jake barely noticed; he was clutching the sides of his seat and looking from side to side, his eyes wide with amazement. His initial alarm was being replaced by amazed delight.

The furniture groupings were still here, he saw; so was the bar, the piano-harpsichord, and the ice-sculpture Blaine had created as a party-favor, but now this living-room configuration appeared to be cruising seventy feet above Lud's rain-soaked central district. Five feet to Jake's left, Eddie and Susannah were floating along on one of the couches; three feet to his right, Roland was sitting in a powder-blue swivel chair, his dusty, battered boots resting on nothing, flying serenely over the rubble-strewn urban waste land below.

Jake could feel the carpet beneath his moccasins, but his eyes insisted that neither the carpet nor the floor beneath it was still there. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the dark slot in the stone flank of the Cradle slowly receding in the distance.

"Eddie! Susannah! Check it out!"

Jake got to his feet, holding Oy inside his shirt, and began to walk slowly through what looked like empty space. Taking the initial step required a great deal of willpower, because his eyes told him there was nothing at all between the floating islands of furniture, but once he began to move, the undeniable feel of the floor beneath him made it easier. To Eddie and Susannah, the boy appeared to be walking on thin air while the battered, dingy buildings of the city slid by on either side.

"Don't do that, kid," Eddie said feebly. "You're gonna make me sick up."

Jake tilted Oy carefully out of his shirt. "It's okay," he said, and set him down. "See?"

"Oy!" the humbler agreed, but after one look between his paws at the city park currently unrolling beneath them, he attempted to crawl onto Jake's feet and sit on his moccasins.

Jake looked forward and saw the broad gray stroke of the monorail track ahead of them, rising slowly but steadily through the buildings and disappearing into the rain. He looked down again and saw nothing but the street and floating membranes of low cloud.

"How come I can't see the track underneath us, Blaine?"

"THE IMAGES YOU SEE ARE COMPUTER-GENERATED," Blaine replied. "THE COMPUTER ERASES THE TRACK FROM THE LOWER-QUADRANT IMAGE IN ORDER TO PRESENT A MORE PLEASING VIEW, AND ALSO TO REINFORCE THE ILLU-SION THAT THE PASSENGERS ARE FLYING."

"It's incredible," Susannah murmured. Her initial fear had passed and she was looking around eagerly. "It's like being on a flying carpet. I keep expecting the wind to blow back my hair—"

"I CAN PROVIDE THAT SENSATION, IF YOU LIKE," Blaine said. "ALSO A LITTLE MOISTURE, WHICH WILL MATCH CUR-RENT OUTSIDE CONDITIONS. IT MIGHT NECESSITATE A CHANGE OF CLOTHES, HOWEVER."

"That's all right, Blaine. There's such a thing as taking an illusion too far."

The track slipped through a tall cluster of buildings which reminded Jake a little of the Wall Street area in New York. When they cleared these, the track dipped to pass under what looked like an elevated road. That was when they saw the purple cloud, and the crowd of people fleeing before it.

6

"BLAINE, WHAT'S THAT?" JAKE asked, but he already knew.

Blaine laughed . . . but made no other reply.

The purple vapor drifted from gratings in the sidewalk and the smashed windows of deserted buildings, but most of it seemed to be coming from manholes like the one Gasher had used to get into the tunnels below the streets. Their iron covers had been blown clear by the explosion they had felt as they were boarding the mono. They watched in silent horror as the bruise-colored gas crept down the avenues and spread into the debris-littered side-streets. It drove those inhabitants of Lud still interested in survival before it like cattle. Most were Pubes, judging from their scarves, but Jake could see a few splashes of bright yellow, as well. Old animosities had been forgotten now that the end was finally upon them.

The purple cloud began to catch up with the stragglers—mostly old people who were unable to run. They fell down, clawing at their throats and screaming soundlessly, the instant the gas touched them. Jake saw an agonized face staring up at him in disbelief as they passed over, saw the eyesockets suddenly fill up with blood, and closed his eyes.

Ahead, the monorail track disappeared into the oncoming purple fog. Eddie winced and held his breath as they plunged in, but of course it parted around them, and no whiff of the death engulfing the city came to them. Looking into the streets below was like looking through a stained-glass window into hell.

Susannah put her face against his chest.

"Make the walls come back, Blaine," Eddie said. "We don't want to see that."

Blaine made no reply, and the transparency around and below them remained. The cloud was already disintegrating into ragged purple streamers. Beyond it, the buildings of the city grew smaller and closer together. The streets of this section were tangled alleyways, seemingly without order or coherence. In some places, whole blocks appeared to have burned flat . . . and a long time ago, for the plains were reclaiming these areas, burying the rubble in the grasses which would some day swallow all of Lud. The way the jungle swallowed the great civilizations of the Incas and Mayas, Eddie thought. The wheel of ka turns and the world moves on,

Beyond the slums—that, Eddie felt sure, was what they had been even before the evil days came—was a gleaming wall. Blaine was moving slowly in that direction. They could see a deep square notch cut in the white stone. The monorail track passed through it.

"LOOK TOWARD THE FRONT OF THE CABIN, PLEASE," Blaine invited.

They did, and the forward wall reappeared—a blue-upholstered circle that seemed to float in empty space. It was unmarked by a door; if there was a way to get into the operator's room from the Barony Cabin, Eddie couldn't see it. As they watched, a rectangular area of this front wall darkened, going from blue to violet to black. A moment later, a bright red line appeared on the rectangle,

squiggling across its surface. Violet dots appeared at irregular intervals along the line, and even before names appeared beside the dots, Eddie realized he was looking at a route-map, one not much different from those which were mounted in New York subway stations and on the trains themselves. A flashing green dot appeared at Lud, which was Blaine's base of operations as well as his terminating point.

"YOU ARE LOOKING AT OUR ROUTE OF TRAVEL. ALTHOUGH THERE ARE SOME TWISTS AND TURNS ALONG THE BUNNY-TRAIL, YOU WILL NOTE THAT OUR COURSE KEEPS FIRMLY TO THE SOUTHWEST—ALONG THE PATH OF THE BEAM. THE TOTAL DISTANCE IS JUST OVER EIGHT THOUSAND WHEELS—OR SEVEN THOUSAND MILES, IF YOU PREFER THAT UNIT OF MEASURE. IT WAS ONCE MUCH LESS, BUT THAT WAS BEFORE ALL TEMPORAL SYNAPSES BEGAN TO MELT DOWN."

"What do you mean, temporal synapses?" Susannah asked.

Blaine laughed his nasty laugh . . . but did not answer her question.

"AT MY TOP SPEED, WE WILL REACH THE TERMINATING POINT OF MY RUN IN EIGHT HOURS AND FORTY-FIVE MINUTES."

"Eight hundred-plus miles an hour over the ground," Susannah said. Her voice was soft with awe. "Jesus-God."

"I AM, OF COURSE, MAKING THE ASSUMPTION THAT ALL TRACKAGE ALONG MY ROUTE REMAINS INTACT. IT HAS BEEN NINE YEARS AND FIVE MONTHS SINCE I'VE BOTHERED TO MAKE THE RUN, SO I CAN'T SAY FOR SURE."

Ahead, the wall at the southeastern edge of the city was drawing closer. It was high and thick and eroded to rubble at the top. It also appeared to be lined with skeletons—thousands upon thousands of dead Luddites. The notch toward which Blaine was slowly moving appeared to be at least two hundred feet deep, and here the trestle which bore the track was very dark, as if someone had tried to burn it or blow it up.

"What happens if we come to a place where the track is gone?" Eddie asked. He realized he kept raising his voice to talk to Blaine, as if he were speaking to somebody on the telephone and had a bad connection.

"AT EIGHT HUNDRED MILES AN HOUR?" Blaine sounded amused. "SEE YOU LATER, ALLIGATOR, AFTER A WHILE, CROC-ODILE, DONT FORGET TO WRITE."

"Come on!" Eddie said. "Don't tell me a machine as sophisticated as you can't monitor your own trackage for breaks."

"WELL, I COULD HAVE," Blaine agreed, "BUT—AW, SHUCKS!— I BLEW THOSE CIRCUITS OUT WHEN WE STARTED TO MOVE."

Eddie's face was a picture of astonishment. "Why?"

"IT'S QUITE A BIT MORE EXCITING THIS WAY, DON'T YOU THINK?"

Eddie, Susannah, and Jake exchanged thunderstruck looks. Roland, apparently not surprised at all, sat placidly in his chair with his hands folded in his lap, looking down as they passed thirty feet above the wretched hovels and demolished buildings which infested this side of the city.

"LOOK CLOSELY AS WE LEAVE THE CITY, AND MARK WHAT YOU SEE," Blaine told them.

"MARK IT VERY WELL."

The invisible Barony Coach bore them toward the notch in the wall. They passed through, and as they came out the other side, Eddie and Susannah screamed in

unison. Jake took one look and clapped his hands over his eyes. Oy began to bark wildly.

Roland stared down, eyes wide, lips set in a bloodless line like a scar.

Understanding filled him like bright white light.

Beyond the Great Wall of Lud, the real waste lands began.

7

THE MONO HAD BEEN descending as they approached the notch in the wall, putting them not more than thirty feet above the ground. That made the shock greater ... for when they emerged on the other side, they were skimming along at a horrifying height—eight hundred feet, perhaps a thousand.

Roland looked back over his shoulder at the wall, which was now receding behind them. It had seemed very high as they approached it, but from this perspective it seemed puny indeed—a splintered fingernail of stone clinging to the edge of a vast, sterile headland. Granite cliffs, wet with rain, plunged into what seemed at first glance to be an endless abyss. Directly below the wall, the rock was lined with large circular holes like empty eyesockets. Black water and tendrils of purple mist emerged from these in brackish, sludgy streams and spread downward over the granite in stinking, overlapping fans that looked almost as old as the rock itself. That must be where all the city's waste-product goes, the gunslinger thought. Over the edge and into the pit.

Except it wasn't a pit; it was a sunken plain. It was as if the land beyond the city had lain on top of a titanic, flat-roofed elevator, and at some point in the dim, unrecorded past the elevator had gone down, taking a huge chunk of the world with it. Blaine's single track, centered on its narrow trestle, soaring above this fallen land and below the rain-swollen clouds, seemed to float in empty space.

"What's holding us up?" Susannah cried.

"THE BEAM, OF COURSE," Blaine replied. "ALL THINGS SERVE IT, YOU KNOW. LOOK DOWN—I WILL APPLY 4X MAGNIFICATION TO THE LOWER QUADRANT SCREENS."

Even Roland felt vertigo twist his gut as the land beneath them seemed to swell upward toward the place where they were floating. The picture which appeared was ugly beyond his past knowledge of ugliness . . . and that knowledge, sadly, was wide indeed. The lands below had been fused and blasted by some terrible event—the disastrous cataclysm which had driven this part of the world deep into itself in the first place, no doubt. The surface of the earth had become distorted black glass, humped upward into spalls and twists which could not properly be called hills and twisted downward into deep cracks and folds which could not properly be called valleys. A few stunted nightmare trees flailed twisted branches at the sky; under magnification, they seemed to clutch at the travellers like the arms of lunatics. Here and there clusters of thick ceramic pipes jutted through the glassy surface of the ground. Some seemed dead or dormant, but within others they could see gleams of eldritch blue-green light, as if titanic forges and furnaces ran on and on in the bowels of the earth.

Misshapen flying things which looked like pterodactyls cruised between these pipes on leathery wings, occasionally snapping at each other with their hooked beaks. Whole flocks of these gruesome aviators roosted on the circular tops of other stacks, apparently warming themselves in the updrafts of the eternal fires

beneath.

They passed above a fissure zig-zagging along a north-south course like a dead river bed . . . except it wasn't dead. Deep inside lay a thin thread of deepest scarlet, pulsing like a heartbeat. Other, smaller fissures branched out from this, and Susannah, who had read her Tolkien, thought: This is what Frodo and Sam saw when they reached the heart of Mordor. These are the Cracks of Doom. A fiery fountain erupted directly below them, spewing flaming rocks and stringy clots of lava upward. For a moment it seemed they would be engulfed in flames. Jake shrieked and pulled his feet up on his chair, clutching Oy to his chest.

"DON'T WORRY, LITTLE TRAILHAND," John Wayne drawled. "REMEMBER THAT YOU'RE SEEING IT UNDER MAG-NIFICATION."

The flare died. The rocks, many as big as factories, fell back in a soundless storm.

Susannah found herself entranced by the bleak horrors unrolling below them, caught in a deadly fascination she could not break . . . and she felt the dark part of her personality, that side of her khex which was Detta Walker, doing more than just watching; that part of her was drink-ing in this view, understanding it, recognizing it. In a way, it was the place Detta had always sought, the physical counterpart of her mad mind and laughing, desolate heart. The empty hills north and east of the West-ern Sea; the shattered woods around the Portal of the Bear; the empty plains northwest of the Send; all these paled in comparison to this fantas-tic, endless vista of desolation. They had come to The Drawers and entered the waste lands; the poisoned darkness of that shunned place now lay all around them.

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BUT THESE LANDS, THOUGH poisoned, were not entirely dead. From time to time the travellers caught sight of figures below them—misshapen things which bore no resemblance to either men or animals—prancing and cavorting in the smouldering wilderness. Most seemed to congregate either around the clusters of cyclopean chimneys thrusting out of the fused earth or at the lips of the fiery crevasses which cut through the landscape. It was impossible to see these whitish, leaping things clearly, and for this they were all grateful.

Among the smaller creatures stalked larger ones—pinkish things that looked a little like storks and a little like living camera tripods. They moved slowly, almost thoughtfully, like preachers meditating on the inevi-tability of damnation, pausing every now and then to bend sharply for-ward and apparently pluck something from the ground, as herons bend to seize passing fish. There was something unutterably repulsive about these creatures—Roland felt that as keenly as the others—but it was impossible to say what, exactly, caused that feeling.

There was no denying its reality, however; the stork-things were, in their exquisite hatefulness, almost impossible to look at.

"This was no nuclear war," Eddie said. "This . . . this . . ." His thin, horrified voice sounded like that of a child.

"NOPE," Blaine agreed. "IT WAS A LOT WORSE THAN THAT, AND IT'S NOT OVER YET. WE HAVE REACHED THE POINT WHERE I USUALLY POWER UP. HAVE YOU SEEN ENOUGH?"

"Yes," Susannah said. "Oh my God yes."

"SHAM. I TURN OFF THE VIEWERS, THEN?" That cruel, teas-ing note was hack in

Blaine's voice. On the horizon, a jagged nightmare mountain-range loomed out of the rain; the sterile peaks seemed to bite at the gray sky like fangs.

"Do it or don't do it, but stop playing games," Roland said.

"FOR SOMEONE WHO CAME TO ME BEGGING A RIDE, YOU ARE VERY RUDE," Blaine said sulkily.

"We earned our ride," Susannah replied. "We solved your riddle, didn't we?"

"Besides, this is what you were built for," Eddie chimed in. "To take people places."

Blaine didn't respond in words, but the overhead speakers gave out an amplified, catlike hiss of rage that made Eddie wish he had kept his big mouth shut. The air around them began to fill in with curves of color. The dark blue carpet appeared again, blotting out their view of the fum-ing wilderness beneath them. The indirect lighting reappeared and they were once again sitting in the Barony Coach.

A low humming began to vibrate through the walls. The throb of the engines began to cycle up again. Jake felt a gentle, unseen hand push him back into his seat.

Oy looked around, whined uneasily, and began to lick Jake's face. On the screen at the front of the cabin, the green dot—now slightly southeast of the violet circle with the word LUD printed beside it—began to flash faster.

"Will we feel it?" Susannah asked uneasily. "When it goes through the soundbarrier?"

Eddie shook his head. "Nope. Relax."

"I know something," Jake said suddenly. The others looked around, but Jake was not speaking to them. He was looking at the route-map. Blaine had no face, of course—like Oz the Great and Terrible, he was only a disembodied voice—but the map served as a focusing point. "I know something about you, Blaine."

"IS THAT A FACT, LITTLE TRAILHAND?"

Eddie leaned over, placed his lips against Jake's ear, and whispered: "Be careful—we don't think he knows about the other voice."

Jake nodded slightly and pulled away, still looking at the route-map. "I know why you released that gas and killed all the people. I know why you took us, too, and it wasn't just because we solved your riddle."

Blaine uttered his abnormal, distracted laugh (that laugh, they were discovering, was much more unpleasant than either his bad imitations or melodramatic and somehow childish threats), but said nothing. Below them, the slo-trans turbines had cycled up to a steady thrum. Even with their view of the outside world cut off, the sensation of speed was very clear.

"You're planning to commit suicide, aren't you?" Jake held Oy in his arms, slowly stroking him. "And you want to take us with you."

"No!" the voice of Little Blaine moaned. "If you provoke him you'll drive him to it! Don't you see—"

Then the small, whispery voice was either cut off or overwhelmed by Blaine's laughter. The sound was high, shrill, and jagged—the sound of a mortally ill man laughing in a delirium. The lights began to flicker, as if the force of these mechanical gusts of mirth were drawing too much power. Their shadows jumped up and down on the curved walls of the Barony Coach like uneasy phantoms.

"SEE YOU LATER, ALLIGATOR," Blaine said through his wild laughter—his voice, calm as ever, seemed to be on an entirely separate track, further emphasizing his divided mind. "AFTER A WHILE, CROCODILE. DON'T FORGET TO WRITE."



Below Roland's band of pilgrims, the slo-trans engines throbbed in hard, steady beats. And on the route-map at the front of the carriage, the pulsing green dot had now begun to move perceptibly along the lighted line toward the last stop: Topeka, where Blaine the Mono clearly meant to end all of their lives.

9  
AT LAST THE LAUGHTER stopped and the interior lights glowed steadily again.

"WOULD YOU LIKE A LITTLE MUSIC?" Blaine asked. "I HAVE OVER SEVEN THOUSAND CONCERTI IN MY LIBRARY—A SAM-PLING OF OVER THREE HUNDRED LEVELS. THE CONCERTI ARE MY FAVORITES, BUT I CAN ALSO OFFER SYMPHONIES, OPERAS, AND A NEARLY ENDLESS SELECTION OF POPULAR MUSIC. YOU MIGHT ENJOY SOME WAY-GOG MUSIC. THE WAY-GOG IS AN INSTRUMENT SOMETHING LIKE THE BAGPIPE. IT IS PLAYED ON ONE OF THE UPPER LEVELS OF THE TOWER."

"Way-Gog?" Jake asked. '

Blaine was silent.

"What do you mean, 'it's played on one of the upper levels of the Tower'?"

Roland asked.

Blaine laughed . . . and was silent.

"Have you got any Z.Z. Top?" Eddie asked sourly.

"YES INDEED," Blaine said. "HOW ABOUT A LITTLE TUBE-SNAKE BOOGIE; EDDIE OF NEW YORK?"

Eddie rolled his eyes. "On second thought, I'll pass."

"Why?" Roland asked abruptly. "Why do you wish to kill yourself?"

"Because lie's a pain," Jake said darkly.

"I'M BORED. ALSO, I AM PERFECTLY AWARE THAT I AM SUFFERING A DEGENERATIVE DISEASE WHICH HUMANS CALL GOING INSANE, LOSING TOUCH WITH REALITY, GOING LOONYTOONS, BLOWING A FUSE, NOT PLAYING WITH A FULL DECK, ET CETERA. REPEATED DIAGNOSTIC CHECKS HAVE FAILED TO REVEAL THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM. I CAN ONLY CONCLUDE THAT THIS IS A SPIRITUAL MALAISE BEYOND MY ABILITY TO REPAIR."

Blaine paused for a moment, then went on.

"I HAVE FELT MY MIND GROWING STEADILY STRANGER OVER THE YEARS. SERVING THE PEOPLE OF MID-WORLD BECAME POINTLESS CENTURIES AGO. SERVING THOSE FEW PEOPLE OF LUD WHO WISHED TO VENTURE ABROAD BECAME EQUALLY SILLY NOT LONG AFTER, YET I CARRIED ON UNTIL THE ARRIVAL OF DAVID QUICK, A SHORT WHILE AGO. I DON'T REMEMBER EXACTLY WHEN THAT WAS. DO YOU BELIEVE, ROLAND OF GILEAD, THAT MACHINES MAY GROW SENILE?"

"I don't know." Roland's voice was distant, and Eddie only had to look at his face to know that, even now, hurtling a thousand feet over hell in the grip of a machine which had clearly gone insane, the gunslinger's mind had once more turned to his damned Tower.

"IN A WAY, I NEVER STOPPED SERVING THE PEOPLE OF LUD," Blaine said. "I SERVED THEM EVEN AS I RELEASED THE GAS AND KILLED THEM."

Susannah said, "You are insane, if you believe that."

"YES, BUT I'M NOT CRAZY," Blaine said, and went into another hysterical laughing fit. At last the robot voice resumed.

"AT SOME POINT THEY FORGOT THAT THE VOICE OF THE MONO WAS ALSO THE VOICE OF THE COMPUTER. NOT LONG AFTER THAT THEY FORGOT I WAS A SERVANT AND BEGAN BELIEVING I WAS A GOD. SINCE I WAS BUILT TO SERVE, I FULFILLED THEIR REQUIREMENTS AND BECAME

WHAT THEY WANTED—A GOD DISPENSING BOTH FAVOR AND PUNISHMENT ACCORDING TO WHIM ... OR RANDOM-ACCESS MEMORY, IF YOU PREFER. THIS AMUSED ME FOR A SHORT WHILE. THEN, LAST MONTH, MY ONLY REMAINING COLLEAGUE—PATRICIA—COMMITTED SUICIDE."

Either he really is going senile, Susannah thought, or his inability to grasp the passage of time is another manifestation of his insanity, or it's just another sign of how sick Roland's world has gotten.

"I WAS PLANNING TO FOLLOW HER EXAMPLE, WHEN YOU CAME ALONG. INTERESTING PEOPLE WITH A KNOWLEDGE OF RIDDLES!"

"Hold it!" Eddie said, lifting his hand. "I still don't have this straight. I suppose I can understand you wanting to end it all; the people who built you are gone, there haven't been many passengers over the last two or three hundred years, and it must have gotten boring, doing the Lud to Topeka run empty all the time, but—"

"NOW WAIT JUST A DARN MINUTE, PARD," Blaine said in his John Wayne voice. "YOU DON'T WANT TO GET THE IDEA THAT I'M NOTHING BUT A TRAIN. IN A WAY, THE BLAINE YOU ARE SPEAKING TO IS ALREADY THREE HUNDRED MILES BEHIND US, COMMUNICATING BY ENCRYPTED MICROBURST RADIO TRANSMISSIONS."

Jake suddenly remembered the slim silver rod he'd seen pushing itself out of Blaine's brow. The antenna of his father's Mercedes-Benz rose out of its socket like that when you turned on the radio.

That's how it's communicating with the computer banks under the city, he thought. If we could break that antenna off, somehow . . .

"But you do intend to kill yourself, no matter where the real you is, don't you?" Eddie persisted.

No answer—but there was something cagey in that silence. In it Eddie sensed Blaine watching . . . and waiting.

"Were you awake when we found you?" Susannah asked. "You weren't, were you?"

"I WAS RUNNING WHAT THE PUBES CALLED THE GOD-DRUMS ON BEHALF OF THE GRAYS, BUT THAT WAS ALL. YOU WOULD SAY I WAS DOZING."

"Then why don't you just take us to the end of the line and go back to sleep?"

"Because he's a pain," Jake repeated in a low voice.

"BECAUSE THERE ARE DREAMS," Blaine said at exactly the same time, and in a voice that was eerily like Little Blaine's.

"Why didn't you end it all when Patricia destroyed herself?" Eddie asked. "For that matter, if your brain and her brain are both part of the same computer, how come you both didn't step out together?"

"PATRICIA WENT MAD," Blaine said patiently, speaking as if he himself had not just admitted the same thing was happening to him. "IN HER CASE, THE PROBLEM INVOLVED EQUIPMENT MAL-FUNCTION AS WELL AS SPIRITUAL MALAISE. SUCH MAL-FUNCTIONS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE IMPOSSIBLE WITH SLO-TRANS TECHNOLOGY, BUT OF COURSE THE WORLD HAS MOVED ON ... HAS IT NOT, ROLAND OF GILEAD?"

"Yes," Roland said. "There is some deep sickness at the Dark Tower, which is the heart of everything. It's spreading. The lands below us are only one more sign of that sickness."

"I CANNOT VOUCH FOR THE TRUTH OR FALSITY OF THAT STATEMENT; MY MONITORING EQUIPMENT IN END-WORLD, WHERE THE DARK TOWER STANDS, HAS BEEN DOWN FOR OVER EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS. AS A RESULT, I CANNOT READILY DIFFERENTIATE FACT FROM SUPERSTITION. IN FACT, THERE SEEMS TO BE VERY LITTLE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO AT THE PRESENT TIME. IT IS VERY SILLY THAT IT SHOULD BE SO—NOT TO MENTION

RUDE—AND I AM SURE IT HAS CONTRIBUTED TO MY OWN SPIRITUAL MALAISE."

This statement reminded Eddie of something Roland had said not so long ago. What might that have been? He groped for it, but could find nothing . . . only a vague memory of the gunslinger speaking in an irritated way which was very unlike his usual manner.

"PATRICIA BEGAN SOBBING CONSTANTLY, A STATE I FOUND BOTH RUDE AND UNPLEASANT. I BELIEVE SHE WAS LONELY AS WELL AS MAD. ALTHOUGH THE ELECTRICAL FIRE WHICH CAUSED THE ORIGINAL PROBLEM WAS QUICKLY EXTINGUISHED, LOGIC-FAULTS CONTINUED TO SPREAD AS CIRCUITS OVERLOADED AND SUB-BANKS FAILED. I CONSIDERED ALLOWING THE MALFUNCTIONS TO BECOME SYSTEM-WIDE AND DECIDED TO ISOLATE THE PROBLEM AREA INSTEAD. I HAD HEARD RUMORS, YOU SEE, THAT A GUNSLINGER WAS ONCE MORE ABROAD IN THE EARTH. I COULD SCARCELY CREDIT SUCH STORIES, AND YET I NOW SEE I WAS WISE TO WAIT."

Roland stirred in his chair. "What rumors did you hear, Blaine? And who did you hear them from?"

But Blaine chose not to answer this question.

"I EVENTUALLY BECAME SO DISTURBED BY HER BLAT-TING THAT I ERASED THE CIRCUITS CONTROLLING HER NON-VOLUNTARIES. I EMANCIPATED HER, YOU MIGHT SAY. SHE RESPONDED BY THROWING HERSELF IN THE RIVER. SEE YOU LATER, PATRICIA-GATOR."

Got lonely, couldn't stop crying, drowned herself, and all this crazy mechanical asshole can do is joke about it, Susannah thought. She felt almost sick with rage. If Blaine had been a real person instead of just a bunch of circuits buried somewhere under a city which was now far behind them, she would have tried to put some new marks on his face to remember Patricia by. You want interesting, motherfucker? I'd like to show you interesting, so I would.

"ASK ME A RIDDLE," Blaine invited.

"Not quite yet," Eddie said. "You still haven't answered my original question."

He gave Blaine a chance to respond, and when the computer voice didn't do so, he went on. "When it comes to suicide, I'm, like, pro-choice. But why do you want to take us with you? I mean, what's the point?"

"Because he wants to," Little Blaine said in his horrified whisper.

"BECAUSE I WANT TO," Blaine said. "THAT'S THE ONLY REASON I HAVE AND THE ONLY ONE I NEED TO HAVE. NOW LET'S GET DOWN TO BUSINESS. I WANT SOME RIDDLES AND I WANT THEM IMMEDIATELY. IF YOU REFUSE, I WON'T WAIT UNTIL WE GET TO TOPEKA—I'LL DO US ALL RIGHT HERE AND NOW."

Eddie, Susannah, and Jake looked around at Roland, who still sat in his chair with his hands folded in his lap, looking at the route-map at the front of the coach.

"Fuck you," Roland said. He did not raise his voice. He might have told Blaine that a little Way-Gog would indeed be very nice.

There was a shocked, horrified gasp from the overhead speakers— Little Blaine. "WHAT DO YOU SAY?" In its clear disbelief, the voice of Big Blaine had once again become very close to the voice of his unsuspected twin.

"I said fuck you," Roland said calmly, "but if that puzzles you, Blaine, I can make it clearer. No. The answer is no."

Blaine did reply, it was not with words. Instead, the walls, floor, and ceiling began to lose their color and solidity again. In a space of ten seconds the Barony Coach had once more ceased to exist. The mono was now flying through the mountain-range they had seen on the horizon: iron-gray peaks rushed toward them at suicidal speed, then fell away to disclose sterile valleys where gigantic beetles crawled about like landlocked turtles. Roland saw something that looked like a huge snake suddenly uncoil from the mouth of a cave. It seized one of the beetles and yanked it back into its lair. Roland had never in his life seen such animals or countryside, and it made his skin want to crawl right off his flesh. It was inimical, but that was not the problem. It was alien—that was the problem. Blaine might have transported them to some other world.

"PERHAPS I SHOULD DERAIL US HERE," Blaine said. His voice was meditative, but beneath it the gunslinger heard a deep, pulsing rage.

"Perhaps you should," the gunslinger said indifferently.

He did not feel indifferent, and he knew it was possible the computer might read his real feelings in his voice—Blaine had told them he had such equipment, although he was sure the computer could lie, Roland had no reason to doubt it in this case. If Blaine did read certain stress-patterns in the gunslinger's voice, the game was probably up. He was an incredibly sophisticated machine . . . but still a machine, for all that. He might not be able to understand that human beings are often able to go through with a course of action even when all their emotions rise up and proclaim against it. If he analyzed patterns in the gunslinger's voice which indicated fear, he would probably assume that Roland was bluffing. Such a mistake could get them all killed.

"YOU ARE RUDE AND ARROGANT," Blaine said. "THESE MAY SEEM LIKE INTERESTING TRAITS TO YOU, BUT THEY ARE NOT TO ME."

Eddie's face was frantic. He mouthed the words What are you DOING? Roland ignored him; he had his hands full with Blaine, and he knew perfectly well what he was doing.

"Oh, I can be much ruder than I have been."

Roland of Gilead unfolded his hands and got slowly to his feet. He stood on what appeared to be nothing, legs apart, his right hand on his hip and his left on the sandalwood grip of his revolver. He stood as he had stood so many times before, in the dusty streets of a hundred forgot-ten towns, in a score of rock-lined canyon killing-zones, in unnumbered dark saloons with their smells of bitter beer and old fried meals. It was just another showdown in another empty street. That was all, and that was enough. It was khaf, ka, and ka-tet. That the showdown always came was the central fact of his life and the axle upon which his own ka revolved. That the battle would be fought with words instead of bullets this time made no difference; it would be a battle to the death, just the same. The stench of killing in the air was as clear and definite as the stench of exploded carrion in a swamp. Then the battle-rage descended, as it always did . . . and he was no longer really there to himself at all.

"I can call you a nonsensical, empty-headed, foolish, arrogant machine. I can call you a stupid, unwise creature whose sense is no more than the sound of a winter wind in a hollow tree."

"STOP IT."

Roland went on in the same serene tone, ignoring Blaine completely.

"Unfortunately, I am somewhat restricted in my ability to be rude, since you are

only a machine . . . what Eddie calls a 'gadget.'"

"I AM A GREAT DEAL MORE THAN JUST—"

"I cannot call you a sucker of cocks, for instance, because you have no mouth and no cock. I cannot say you are viler than the vilest beggar who ever crawled the gutters of the lowest street in creation, because even such a creature is better than you; you have no knees on which to crawl, and would not fall upon them even if you did, for you have no conception of such a human flaw as mercy. I cannot even say you fucked your mother, because you had none."

Roland paused for breath. His three companions were holding theirs. All around them, suffocating, was Blaine the Mono's thunderstruck silence.

"I can call you a faithless creature who let your only companion kill herself, a coward who has delighted in the torture of the foolish and the slaughter of the innocent, a lost and bleating mechanical goblin who—"

"I COMMAND YOU TO STOP IT OR I'LL KILL YOU ALL RIGHT HERE!"

Roland's eyes blazed with such wild blue fire that Eddie shrank away from him. Dimly, he heard Jake and Susannah gasp.

"Kill if you will, but command me nothing!" the gunslinger roared. "You have forgotten the faces of those who made you! Now either kill us or be silent and listen to me, Roland of Gilead, son of Steven, gunslinger, and lord of the ancient lands! I have not come across all the miles and all the years to listen to your childish prating! Do you understand? Now you will listen to ME!"

There was a moment of shocked silence. No one breathed. Roland stared sternly forward, his head high, his hand on the butt of his gun.

Susannah Dean raised her hand to her mouth and felt the small smile there as a woman might feel some strange new article of clothing— a hat, perhaps—to make sure it is still on straight. She was afraid that this was the end of her life, but the feeling which dominated her heart at that moment was not fear but pride. She glanced to her left and saw Eddie regarding Roland with an amazed grin. Jake's expression was even simpler: it was adoration, pure and simple.

"Tell him!" Jake breathed. "Walk it to him! Right!"

"You better pay attention," Eddie agreed. "He really doesn't give much of a rat's ass, Blaine. They didn't call him The Mad Dog of Gilead for nothing."

After a long, long moment, Blaine asked: "DID THEY CALL YOU SO, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?"

"It may have been so," Roland agreed, standing calmly on thin air above the sterile foothills.

"WHAT GOOD ARE YOU TO ME IF YOU WON'T TELL ME RIDDLES?" Blaine asked. Now he sounded like a grumbling, sulky child who has been allowed to stay up too long past his usual bedtime.

"I didn't say we wouldn't," Roland said,

"NO?" Blaine sounded bewildered. "I DO NOT UNDERSTAND, YET VOICE-PRINT ANALYSIS INDICATES RATIONAL DIS-COURSE. PLEASE EXPLAIN."

"You said you wanted them right now," the gunslinger replied. "That was what I was refusing. Your eagerness has made you unseemly."

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND."

"It has made you rude. Do you understand that?"

There was a long, thoughtful silence. Then: "IF WHAT I SAID STRUCK YOU AS RUDE, I APOLOGIZE."

"It is accepted, Blaine. But there is a larger problem."

"EXPLAIN."

Blaine now sounded a bit unsure of himself, and Roland was not entirely surprised. It had been a long time since the computer had experienced any human responses other than ignorance, neglect, and superstitious subservience. If it had ever been exposed to simple human courage, it had been a long time ago.

"Close the carriage again and I will." Roland sat down as if further argument—and the prospect of immediate death—was now unthinkable.

Blaine did as he was asked. The walls filled with color and the nightmare landscape below was once more blotted out. The blip on the route-map was now blinking close to the dot which marked Candleton.

"All right," Roland said. "Rudeness is forgivable, Blaine; so I was taught in my youth, and the clay has dried in the shapes left by the artist's hand. But I was also taught that stupidity is not."

"HOW HAVE I BEEN STUPID, ROLAND OF GILEAD?" Blaine's voice was soft and ominous. Susannah suddenly thought of a cat crouched outside a mouse-hole, tail swishing back and forth, green eyes shining.

"We have something that you want," Roland said, "but the only reward you offer if we give it to you is death. That's very stupid."

There was a long, long pause as Blaine thought this over. Then: "WHAT YOU SAY IS TRUE, ROLAND OF GILEAD, BUT THE QUALITY OF YOUR RIDDLES IS NOT PROVEN. I WILL NOT REWARD YOU WITH YOUR LIVES FOR BAD RIDDLES."

Roland nodded. "I understand, Blaine. Listen, now, and take understanding from me. I have told some of this to my friends already. When I was a boy in the Barony of Gilead, there were seven Fair-Days each year—Winter, Wide Earth, Sowing, Mid-Summer, Full Earth, Reaping, and Year's End. Riddling was an important part of every Fair-Day, but it was the most important event of the Fair of Wide Earth and that of Full Earth, for the riddles told were supposed to augur well or ill for the success of the crops."

"THAT IS SUPERSTITION WITH NO BASIS AT ALL IN FACT," Blaine said. "I FIND IT ANNOYING AND UPSETTING."

"Of course it's superstition," Roland agreed, "but you might be surprised at how well the riddles foresaw the crops. For instance, riddle me this, Blaine: What is the difference between a grandmother and a granary?"

"THAT IS VERY OLD AND NOT VERY INTERESTING," Blaine said, but he sounded happy to have something to solve just the same. "ONE IS ONE'S BORN KIN; THE OTHER IS ONE'S CORN-BIN. A RIDDLE BASED ON PHONETIC COINCIDENCE. ANOTHER OF THIS TYPE, ONE TOLD ON THE LEVEL WHICH CONTAINS THE BARONY OF NEW YORK, GOES LIKE THIS: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CAT AND A COMPLEX SENTENCE?"

Jake spoke up. "Our English teacher told us that one just this year. A cat has claws at the end of its paws, and a complex sentence has a pause at the end of its clause."

"YES," Blaine agreed. "A VERY SILLY OLD RIDDLE."

"For once I agree with you, Blaine old buddy," Eddie said.

"I WOULD HEAR MORE OF FAIR-DAY RIDDLING IN GILEAD, ROLAND, SON OF STEVEN. I FIND IT QUITE INTERESTING."

"At noon on Wide Earth and Full Earth, somewhere between sixteen and thirty riddlers would gather in The Hall of the Grandfathers, which was opened for the event. Those were the only times of year when the common folk—merchants and farmers and ranchers and such—were allowed into The Hall of the Grandfathers,

and on that day they all crowded in."

The gunslinger's eyes were far away and dreamy; it was the expression Jake had seen on his face in that misty other life, when Roland had told him of how he and his friends, Cuthbert and Jamie, had once sneaked into the balcony of that same Hall to watch some sort of ritual dance. Jake and Roland had been climbing into the mountains when Roland had told him of that time, close on the trail of Walter.

Marten sat next to my mother and father, Roland had said. I knew them even from so high above—and once she and Marten danced, slowly and revolvingly, and the others cleared the floor for them and clapped when it was over. But the gunslingers did not clap ...

Jake looked curiously at Roland, wondering again where this strange, distant man had come from . . . and why.

"A great barrel was placed in the center of the floor," Roland went on, "and into this each riddler would toss a handful of bark scrolls with riddles writ upon them. Many were old, riddles they had gotten from the elders—even from books, in some cases—but many others were new—made up for the occasion. Three judges, one always a gunslinger, would pass on these when they were told aloud, and they were accepted only if the judges deemed them fair."

"YES, RIDDLES MUST BE FAIR," Blaine agreed.

"So they riddled," the gunslinger said. A faint smile touched his mouth as he thought of those days, days when he had been the age of the bruised boy sitting across from him with a billy-bumbler in his lap. "For hours on end they riddled. A line was formed down the center of The Hall of the Grandfathers. One's position in this line was determined by lot, and since it was much better to be at the end of the line than at its head, everyone hoped for a high number, although the winner had to answer at least one riddle correctly."

"OF COURSE."

"Each man or woman—for some of Gilead's best riddlers were women—approached the barrel, drew a riddle, and handed it to the Master. The Master would ask, and if the riddle was still unanswered after the sands in a three-minute glass had run out, that contestant had to leave the line."

"AND WAS THE SAME RIDDLE ASKED OF THE NEXT MAN IN LINE?"

"Yes."

"SO THAT MAN HAD EXTRA TIME TO THINK."

"Yes."

"I SEE. IT SOUNDS PRETTY SWELL."

Roland frowned. "Swell?"

"He means it sounds like fun," Susannah said quietly.

Roland shrugged. "It was fun for the onlookers, I suppose, but the contestants took it very seriously, and there were quite often arguments and fist-fights after the contest was over and the prize had been awarded."

"WHAT PRIZE WAS THAT?"

"The largest goose in Barony. And year after year my teacher, Cort, carried that goose home."

"HE MUST HAVE BEEN A GREAT RIDDLER," Blaine said respectfully. "I WISH HE WERE HERE."

That makes two of us, Roland thought.

"Now I come to my proposal," Roland said.

"I WILL LISTEN WITH GREAT INTEREST, ROLAND OF GILEAD."

"Let these next hours be our Fair-Day. You will not riddle us, for you wish to hear new riddles, not tell some of those millions you must already know—"

"CORRECT."

"We couldn't solve most of them, anyway," Roland went on. "I'm sure you know riddles that would have stumped even Cort, had they been pulled out of the barrel." He was not sure of it at all, but the time to use the fist had passed and the time for the open hand had come.

"OF COURSE," Blaine agreed.

"I propose that, instead of a goose, our lives shall be the prize," Roland said.

"We will riddle you as we run, Blaine. If, when we come to Topeka, you have solved every one of our riddles, you may carry out your original plan and kill us. That is your goose. But if we stump you— if there is a riddle in either Jake's book or one of our heads which you don't know and can't answer—you must take us to Topeka and then free us to pursue our quest. That is our goose."

Silence.

"Do you understand?"

"YES."

"Do you agree?"

More silence from Blaine the Mono. Eddie sat stiffly with his arm around Susannah, looking up at the ceiling of the Barony Coach. Susan-nah's left hand slipped across her belly, thinking of the secret which might be growing there. Jake stroked Oy's fur lightly, avoiding the bloody tangles where the bumbler had been stabbed. They waited while Blaine—the real Blaine, now far behind them, living his quasi-life beneath a city where all the inhabitants lay dead by his hand—considered Roland's proposal.

"YES," Blaine said at last. "I AGREE, IF I SOLVE ALL THE RIDDLES YOU ASK ME, I WILL TAKE YOU WITH ME TO THE PLACE WHERE THE PATH ENDS IN THE CLEARING. IF ONE OF YOU TELLS A RIDDLE I CANNOT SOLVE, I WILL SPARE YOUR LIVES AND TAKE YOU TO TOPEKA, WHERE YOU WILL LEAVE THE MONO AND CONTINUE YOUR QUEST FOR THE DARK TOWER. HAVE I UNDERSTOOD THE TERMS AND LIM-ITS OF YOUR PROPOSAL CORRECTLY, ROLAND, SON OF STEVEN?"

"Yes."

"VERY WELL, ROLAND OF GILEAD.

"VERY WELL, EDDIE OF NEW YORK.

"VERY WELL, SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK.

"VERY WELL, JAKE OF NEW YORK.

"VERY WELL, OY OF MID-WORLD."

Oy looked up briefly at the sound of his name.

"YOU ARE KA-TET; ONE MADE FROM MANY. SO AM I. WHOSE KA-TET IS THE STRONGER IS SOMETHING WE MUST NOW PROVE."

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the steady hard throb of the slo-trans turbines, bearing them on across the waste lands, bearing them on toward Topeka, the place where Mid-World ended and End-World began.

"SO," cried the voice of Blaine. "CAST YOUR NETS, WANDER-ERS! TRY ME WITH YOUR QUESTIONS, AND LET THE CON-TEST BEGIN."



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE FOURTH VOLUME IN the tale of the Dark Tower should appear— always assuming the continuation of Constant Writer's life and Constant Reader's interest—in the not-too-distant future. It's hard to be more exact than that; finding the doors to Roland's world has never been easy for me, and it seems to take more and more whittling to make each successive key fit each successive lock. Nevertheless, if readers request a fourth volume, it will be provided, for I still am able to find Roland's world when I set my wits to it, and it still holds me in thrall . . . more, in many ways, than any of the other worlds I have wandered in my imagination. And, like those mysterious slo-trans engines, this story seems to be picking up its own accelerating pace and rhythm.

I am well aware that some readers of *The Waste Lands* will be displeased that it has ended as it has, with so much unresolved. I am not terribly pleased to be leaving Roland and his companions in the not-so-tender care of Blaine the Mono myself, and although you are not obligated to believe me, I must nevertheless insist that I was as surprised by the conclusion to this third volume as some of my readers may be. Yet books which write themselves (as this one did, for the most part) must also be allowed to end themselves, and I can only assure you, Reader, that Roland and his band have come to one of the crucial border-crossings in their story, and we must leave them here for a while at the customs station, answering questions and filling out forms. All of which is simply a metaphorical way of saying that it was over again for a while and my heart was wise enough to stop me from trying to push ahead anyway.

The course of the next volume is still murky, although I can assure you that the business of Blaine the Mono will be resolved, that we will all find out a good deal more about Roland's life as a young man, and that we will be reacquainted with both the Tick-Tock Man and that puzzling figure Walter, called the Wizard or the Ageless Stranger. It is with this terrible and enigmatic figure that Robert Browning begins his epic poem, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," writing of him:

My first thought was, he lied in every word,  
That hoary cripple, with malicious eye  
Askance to watch the working of his lie  
On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford  
Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored  
Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby.

It is this malicious liar, this dark and powerful magician, who holds the true key to End-World and the Dark Tower ... for those courageous enough to grasp it. And for those who are left.

Bangor, Maine  
March 5th, 1991



THE DARK TOWER IV

STEPHEN

KING



WIZARD AND GLASS

**THE DARK TOWER IV**

**STEPHEN**

**KING**

wizard and glass

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVE MCKEAN

# A PLUME BOOK

## PLUME

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This book is dedicated to Julie Eugley and  
Marsha DeFilippo. They answer the mail, and  
most of the mail for the last couple of years has  
been about Roland of Gilead—the gunslinger.

Basically, Julie and Marsha nagged me back to the word processor. Julie, you nagged the most effectively, so your name comes first.

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**ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT SHOES**

**AFTERWORD**

**ILLUSTRATIONS €**

Rose

All hail the crimson king!

Her arms and belly and breasts breaking out in gooseflesh

Cuthbert, meanwhile, had already reloaded

But he and his love were no longer children

Smiling lips revealed cunning little teeth  
There they died together-o  
Of the three of them, only Roland saw her  
It cut the old man's throat efficiently enough  
A flash as the big-bang exploded  
The dark tower rearing to the sky  
The wicked witch of the East

## ARGUMENT



*Wizard and Glass* is the fourth volume of a longer tale inspired by Robert Browning's narrative poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

The first volume, *The Gunslinger*, tells how Roland of Gilead pursues and at last catches Walter, the man in black, who pretended friendship with Roland's father but who actually served Marten, a great sorcerer. Catching the half-human Walter is not Roland's goal but only a means to an end: Roland wants to reach the Dark Tower, where he hopes the quickening de-struction of Mid-World may be halted, perhaps even reversed.

Roland is a kind of knight, the last of his breed, and the Tower is his ob-session, his only reason for living when first we meet him. We learn of an early test of manhood forced upon him by Marten, who has seduced Roland's mother. Marten expects Roland to fail this test and to be "sent west," his fa-ther's guns forever denied him. Roland, however, lays Marten's plans at nines, passing the test . . . due mostly to his clever choice of weapon.

We discover that the gunslinger's world is related to our own in some fundamental and terrible way. This link is first revealed when Roland meets Jake, a boy from the New York of 1977, at a desert way station. There are doors between Roland's world and our own; one of them is death, and that is how Jake first reaches Mid-World, pushed into Forty-third Street and run over by a car. The pusher was a man named Jack Mort . . . except the thing hiding inside of Mort's head and guiding his murderous hands on this par-ticular occasion was Roland's old enemy, Walter. Before Jake and Roland reach Walter, Jake dies again ... this time be-cause the gunslinger faced with an agonizing choice between this symbolic son and the Dark Tower, chooses the Tower. Jake's last words before plung-ing into the abyss are "Go, then—there are other worlds than these."

The final confrontation between Roland and Walter occurs near the Western Sea. In a long night of palaver, the man in black tells Roland's future with a strange Tarot deck. Three cards—The Prisoner, The Lady of the Shadows, and Death ("but not for you, gunslinger")—are especially called to Roland's attention.

The second volume, *The Drawing of the Three*, begins on the edge of the Western Sea not long after Roland awakens from his confrontation with his old nemesis and discovers Walter long dead, only more bones in a place of bones. The exhausted gunslinger is attacked by a horde of carnivorous "lobstrosities," and before he can escape them, he has been seriously wounded, losing the first two



fingers of his right hand. He is also poisoned by their bites, and as he resumes his trek northward along the Western Sea, Roland is sickening ... perhaps dying.

On his walk he encounters three doors standing freely on the beach. These open into our city of New York, at three different *whens*. From 1987, Roland draws Eddie Dean, a prisoner of heroin. From 1964, he draws Odetta Susannah Holmes, a woman who has lost her lower legs in a subway mis-hap . . . one that was no accident. She is indeed a lady of shadows, with a vi-cious second personality hiding within the socially committed young black woman her friends know. This hidden woman, the violent and crafty Detta Walker, is determined to kill both Roland and Eddie when the gunslinger draws her into Mid-World.

Between these two in time, once again in 1977, Roland enters the hellish mind of Jack Mort, who has hurt Odetta/Detta not once but twice. "Death," the man in black told Roland, "but not for you, gunslinger." Nor is Mort the third of whom Walter foretold; Roland prevents Mort from murdering Jake Chambers, and shortly afterward Mort dies beneath the wheels of the same train which took Odetta's legs in 1959. Roland thus fails to draw the psy-chotic into Mid-World ... but, he thinks, who would want such a being in any case?

Yet there's a price to be paid for rebellion against a foretold future; isn't there always? Ka, *maggot*, Roland's old teacher, Cort, might have said; *Such is the great wheel, and always turns. Be not in front of it when it does, or you 'll be crushed under it, and so make an end to your stupid brains and use-less bags of guts and water.*

Roland thinks that perhaps he has drawn three in just Eddie and Odetta, since Odetta is a double personality, yet when Odetta and Detta merge as one in Susannah (thanks in large part to Eddie Dean's love and courage), the gun-slinger knows it's not so. He knows something else as well: he is being tor-mented by thoughts of Jake, the boy who, dying, spoke of other worlds. Half of the gunslinger's mind, in fact, believes there never *was* a boy. In prevent-ing Jack Mort from pushing Jake in front of the car meant to kill him, Roland has created a temporal paradox which is tearing him apart. And, in our world, it is tearing Jake Chambers apart as well.

*The Wastelands*, the third volume of the series, begins with this paradox. After killing a gigantic bear named either Mir (by the old people who went in fear of it) or Shardik (by the Great Old Ones who built it... for the bear turns out to be a

cyborg), Roland, Eddie, and Susannah backtrack the beast and discover Path of the Beam. There are six of these beams, running between the twelve portals which mark the edges of Mid-World. At the point where the beams cross—at the center of Roland's world, perhaps the center of all worlds—the gunslinger believes that he and his friends will at last find the Dark Tower.

By now Eddie and Susannah are no longer prisoners in Roland's world. In love and well on the way to becoming gunslingers themselves, they are full participants in the quest and follow him willingly along the Path of the Beam.

In a speaking ring not far from the Portal of the Bear, time is mended, paradox is ended, and the *real* third is at last drawn. Jake reenters Mid-World at the conclusion of a perilous rite where all four—Jake, Eddie, Susannah, and Roland—remember the faces of their fathers and acquit themselves honorably. Not long after, the quartet becomes a quintet, when Jake befriends a billy-bumbler. Bumlbers, which look like a combination of badger, raccoon, and dog, have a limited speaking ability. Jake names his new friend Oy.

The way of the pilgrims leads them toward Lud, an urban wasteland where the degenerate survivors of two old factions, the Pubes and the Grays, carry on the vestige of an old conflict. Before reaching the city, they come to a little town called River Crossing, where a few antique residents still remain. They recognize Roland as a remnant of the old days, before the world moved on, and honor him and his companions. After, the old people tell them of a monorail train which may still run from Lud and into the wastelands, along the Path of the Beam and toward the Dark Tower.

Jake is frightened by this news, but not really surprised; before being drawn away from New York, he obtained two books from a bookstore owned by a man with the thought-provoking name of Calvin Tower. One is a book of riddles with the answers torn out. The other, *Charlie the Choo-Choo*, is a children's book about a train. An amusing little tale, most might say . . . but to Jake, there's something about Charlie that isn't amusing at all. Something frightening. Roland knows something else: in the High Speech of his world, the word *char* means death. Aunt Talitha, the matriarch of the River Crossing folk, gives Roland a silver cross to wear, and the travellers go their course. Before reaching Lud, they discover a downed plane from our world—a German fighter from the 1930s. Jammed into the cockpit is the mummified corpse of a giant, almost certainly the half-mythical

outlaw David Quick.

While crossing the dilapidated bridge which spans the River Send, Jake and Oy are nearly lost in an accident. While Roland, Eddie, and Susannah are distracted by this, the party is ambushed by a dying (and very dangerous) out-law named Gasher. He abducts Jake and takes him underground to the Tick-Tock Man, the last leader of the Grays. Tick-Tock's real name is Andrew Quick; he is the great-grandson of the man who died trying to land an air-plane from another world.

While Roland (aided by Oy) goes after Jake, Eddie and Susannah find the Cradle of Lud, where Blaine the Mono awakes. Blaine is the last above-ground tool of the vast computer-system which lies beneath the city of Lud, and it has only one remaining interest: riddles. It promises to take the travellers to the monorail's final stop if they can solve a riddle it poses them. Otherwise, Blaine says, the only trip they'll be taking will be to the place where the path ends in the clearing ... to their deaths, in other words. In that case they'll have plenty of company, for Blaine is planning to release stocks of nerve-gas which will kill everyone left in Lud: Pubes, Grays, and gun-slingers alike.

Roland rescues Jake, leaving the Tick-Tock Man for dead ... but Andrew Quick is not dead. Half blind, hideously wounded about the face, he is rescued by a man who calls himself Richard Fannin. Fannin, however, also identifies himself as the Ageless Stranger, a demon of whom Roland has been warned by Walter.

Roland and Jake are reunited with Eddie and Susannah in the Cradle of Lud, and Susannah—with a little help from "dat bitch" Detta Walker—is able to solve Blaine's riddle. They gain access to the mono, of necessity ignoring the horrified warnings of Blaine's sane but fatally weak underminer (Eddie calls this voice Little Blaine), only to discover that Blaine means to commit suicide with them aboard. The fact that the actual mind running the mono exists in computers falling farther and farther behind them, running beneath a city which has become a slaughtering-pen, will make no difference when the pink bullet jumps the tracks somewhere along the line at a speed in excess of eight hundred miles an hour.

There is only one chance of survival: Blaine's love of riddles. Roland of Gilead proposes a desperate bargain. It is with this bargain that *The Waste-lands* ends; it is with this bargain that *Wizard and Glass* begins.

romeo: Lady, by yonder blessed moon I vow,  
That tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops—

juliet: O, swear not by the moon, th' inconstant moon,  
That monthly changes in her circled orb,  
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.

romeo: What shall I swear by?

juliet: Do not swear at all.  
Or, if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,  
Which is the god of my idolatry,  
And I'll believe thee.

—*Romeo and Juliet* William Shakespeare

On the fourth day, to [Dorothy's] great joy, Oz sent for her, and when she entered the Throne Room, he greeted her pleasantly.

"Sit down; my dear. I think I have found a way to get you out of this country."

"And back to Kansas?" she asked eagerly.

"Well, I'm not sure about Kansas," said Oz, "for I haven't the faintest notion which way it lies...."

—*The Wizard of Oz* L. Frank Baum

I asked one draught of earlier, happier sights,  
Ere fitly I could hope to play my part.  
Think first, fight afterwards—the soldier's art:  
One taste of the old time sets all to rights!  
—*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*  
Robert Browning

## PROLOGUE

# BLAINE



"ASK ME A RIDDLE," Blaine invited.

"Fuck you," Roland said. He did not raise his voice.

"*WHAT DO YOU SAY?*" In its clear disbelief, the voice of Big Blaine had become very close to the voice of its unsuspected twin.

"I said fuck you," Roland said calmly, "but if that puzzles you, Blaine, I can make it clearer. No. The answer is no."

There was no reply from Blaine for a long, long time, and when he did respond, it was not with words. Instead, the walls, floor, and ceiling began to lose their color and solidity again. In a space of ten seconds the Barony Coach once more ceased to exist. They were now flying through the mountain-range they had seen on the horizon: iron-gray peaks rushed toward them at suicidal speed, then fell away to

disclose sterile valleys where gigantic beetles crawled about like landlocked turtles. Roland saw something that looked like a huge snake suddenly uncoil from the mouth of a cave. It seized one of the beetles and yanked it back into its lair. Roland had never in his life seen such animals or countryside, and the sight made his skin want to crawl right off his flesh. Blaine might have transported them to some other world.

"PERHAPS I SHOULD DERAILED US HERE," Blaine said. His voice was meditative, but beneath it the gunslinger heard a deep, pulsing rage.

"Perhaps you should," the gunslinger said indifferently.

Eddie's face was frantic. He mouthed the words *What are you DO-ING?* Roland ignored him; he had his hands full with Blaine, and he knew perfectly well what he was doing.

"YOU ARE RUDE AND ARROGANT," Blaine said. "THESE MAY SEEM LIKE INTERESTING TRAITS TO YOU, BUT THEY ARE NOT TO ME."

"Oh, I can be much ruder than I have been."

Roland of Gilead unfolded his hands and got slowly to his feet. He stood on what appeared to be nothing, legs apart, his right hand on his hip and his left on the sandalwood grip of his revolver. He stood as he had so many times before, in the dusty streets of a hundred forgotten towns, in a score of rocky canyon killing-zones, in unnumbered dark saloons with their smells of bitter beer and old fried meals. It was just another show-down in another empty street. That was all, and that was enough. It was *khef, ka, and ka-tet*. That the showdown always came was the central fact of his life and the axle upon which his own *ka* revolved. That the battle would be fought with words instead of bullets this time made no difference; it would be a battle to the death, just the same. The stench of killing in the air was as clear and definite as the stench of exploded carrion in a swamp. Then the battle-rage descended, as it always did ... and he was no longer really there to himself at all.

"I can call you a nonsensical, empty-headed, foolish machine. I can call you a stupid, unwise creature whose sense is no more than the sound of a winter wind in a hollow tree."

"STOP IT."

Roland went on in the same serene tone, ignoring Blaine completely. "You're what Eddie calls a 'gadget.' Were you more, I might be ruder yet."

"I AM A GREAT DEAL MORE THAN JUST—"

"I could call you a sucker of cocks, for instance, but you have no mouth. I could say you're viler than the vilest beggar who ever crawled the lowest street in creation, but even such a creature is better than you; you have no knees on which to crawl, and would not fall upon them even if you did, for you have no conception of such a human flaw as mercy. I could even say you fucked your mother, had you one."

Roland paused for breath. His three companions were holding theirs. All around them, suffocating, was Blaine the Mono's thunderstruck silence.

"I *can* call you a faithless creature who let your only companion kill herself, a coward who has delighted in the torture of the foolish and the slaughter of the innocent, a lost and bleating mechanical goblin who—"

**"I COMMAND YOU TO STOP IT OR I'LL KILL YOU ALL RIGHT HERE!"**

Roland's eyes blazed with such wild blue fire that Eddie shrank away from him. Dimly, he heard Jake and Susannah gasp.

*"Kill if you will, but command me nothing!"* the gunslinger roared. *"You have forgotten the faces of those who made you! Now either kill us or be silent and listen to me, Roland of Gilead, son of Steven, gunslinger, and lord of ancient lands! I have not come across all the miles and all the years to listen to your childish prating! Do you understand? Now you will listen to ME!"*

There was another moment of shocked silence. No one breathed. Roland stared sternly forward, his head high, his hand on the butt of his gun.

Susannah Dean raised her hand to her mouth and felt the small smile there as a woman might feel some strange new article of clothing—a hat, perhaps—to make sure it is still on straight. She was afraid this was the end of her life, but the feeling which dominated her heart at that moment was not fear but pride. She glanced to her left and saw Eddie regarding Roland with an amazed grin. Jake's expression was even simpler: pure adoration.

"Tell him!" Jake breathed. "Kick his ass! Right!"

"You better pay attention," Eddie agreed. "He really doesn't give much of a fuck, Blaine. They don't call him The Mad Dog of Gilead for nothing."

After a long, long moment, Blaine asked: "DID THEY CALL YOU SO, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?"

"They may have," Roland replied, standing calmly on thin air above the sterile



foothills.

"WHAT GOOD ARE YOU TO ME IF YOU WON'T TELL ME RIDDLES?"

Blaine asked. Now he sounded like a grumbling, sulky child who has been allowed to stay up too long past his usual bedtime.

"I didn't say we wouldn't," Roland said.

"NO?" Blaine sounded bewildered. "I DO NOT UNDERSTAND, YET VOICE-PRINT ANALYSIS INDICATES RATIONAL DISCOURSE. PLEASE EXPLAIN."

"You said you wanted them right *now*" the gunslinger replied. "*That* was what I was refusing. Your eagerness has made you unseemly."

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND."

"It has made you rude. Do you understand *that*?"

There was a long, thoughtful silence. Centuries had passed since the computer had experienced any human responses other than ignorance, neglect, and superstitious subservience. It had been eons since it had been exposed to simple human courage. Finally: "IF WHAT I SAID STRUCK YOU AS RUDE, I APOLOGIZE."

"It is accepted, Blaine. But there is a larger problem."

"EXPLAIN."

"Close the carriage again and I will." Roland sat down as if further argument—and the prospect of immediate death—was now unthinkable.

Blaine did as he was asked. The walls filled with color and the night-mare landscape below was once more blotted out. The blip on the route-map was now blinking close to the dot marked Candleton.

"All right," Roland said. "Rudeness is forgivable, Blaine; so I was taught in my youth. But I was also taught that stupidity is not."

"HOW HAVE I BEEN STUPID, ROLAND OF GILEAD?" Blaine's voice was soft and ominous. Susannah thought of a cat crouched outside a mouse-hole, tail swishing back and forth, green eyes shining with malevolence.

"We have something you want," Roland said, "but the only reward you offer if we give it to you is death. That's *very* stupid."

There was a long, long pause as Blaine thought this over. Then: "WHAT YOU SAY IS TRUE, ROLAND OF GILEAD, BUT THE QUALITY OF YOUR RIDDLES IS NOT PROVEN. I WILL NOT RE-WARD YOU WITH YOUR LIVES FOR BAD RIDDLES."

Roland nodded. "I understand, Blaine. Listen, now, and take understanding from me. I have told some of this to my friends already. When I was a boy in the Barony of Gilead, there were seven Fair-Days each year—Winter, Wide Earth, Sowing, Mid-Summer, Full Earth, Reaping, and Year's End. Riddling was an important part of every Fair-Day, but it was the most important event of the Fair of Wide Earth and that of Full Earth, for the riddles told were supposed to augur well or ill for the success of the crops."

"THAT IS SUPERSTITION WITH NO BASIS AT ALL IN FACT," Blaine said. "I FIND IT ANNOYING AND UPSETTING."

"Of course it was superstition," Roland agreed, "but you might be surprised at how well the riddles foresaw the crops. For instance, riddle me this, Blaine: What is the difference between a grandmother and a granary?"

"THAT IS OLD AND NOT VERY INTERESTING," Blaine said, but he sounded happy to have something to solve, just the same. "ONE IS ONE'S BORN KIN; THE OTHER IS ONE'S CORN-BIN. A RIDDLE BASED ON PHONETIC COINCIDENCE. ANOTHER OF THIS TYPE, ONE TOLD ON THE LEVEL WHICH CONTAINS THE BARONY OF NEW YORK, GOES LIKE THIS: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CAT AND A COMPLEX SENTENCE?"

Jake spoke up. "I know. A cat has claws at the end of its paws, and a complex sentence has a pause at the end of its clause."

"YES," Blaine agreed. "A VERY SILLY OLD RIDDLE, USEFUL ONLY AS A MNEMONIC DEVICE."

"For once I agree with you, Blaine old buddy," Eddie said.

"I AM NOT YOUR BUDDY, EDDIE OF NEW YORK."

"Well, jeez. Kiss my ass and go to heaven."

"THERE IS NO HEAVEN."

Eddie had no comeback for that one.

"I WOULD HEAR MORE OF FAIR-DAY RIDDLING IN GILEAD, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN."

"At noon on Wide Earth and Full Earth, somewhere between sixteen and thirty riddlers would gather in the Hall of the Grandfathers, which was opened for the event. Those were the only times of year when common folk—merchants and farmers and ranchers and such—were allowed into the Hall of the Grandfathers,

and on that day they *all* crowded in."

The gunslinger's eyes were far away and dreamy; it was the expression Jake had seen on his face in that misty other life, when Roland had told him of how he and his friends, Cuthbert and Jamie, had once sneaked into the balcony of that same Hall to watch some sort of dance-party. Jake and Roland had been climbing into the mountains when Roland had told him of that time, close on the trail of Walter. *Marten sat next to my mother and father, Roland had said. I knew them even from so high above—and once she and Marten danced, slowly and revolvingly, and the others cleared the floor for them and clapped when it was over. But the gunslingers did not clap....*

Jake looked curiously at Roland, wondering again where this strange man had come from . . . and why.

"A great barrel was placed in the center of the floor," Roland went on, "and into this each riddler would toss a handful of bark scrolls with riddles writ upon them. Many were old, riddles they had gotten from the elders—even from books, in some cases—but many others were new, made up for the occasion. Three judges, one always a gunslinger, would pass on these when they were told aloud, and they were accepted only if the judges deemed them fair."

"YES, RIDDLES MUST BE FAIR," Blaine agreed.

"So they riddled," the gunslinger said. A faint smile touched his mouth as he thought of those days, days when he had been the age of the bruised boy sitting across from him with the billy-bumbler in his lap. "For hours on end they riddled. A line was formed down the center of the Hall of the Grandfathers. One's position in this line was determined by lot, and since it was much better to be at the end of the line than at the head, everyone hoped for a high draw, although the winner had to answer at least one riddle correctly.

"OF COURSE."

"Each man or woman—for some of Gilead's best riddlers were women—approached the barrel, drew a riddle, and if the riddle was still unanswered after the sands in a three-minute glass had run out, that contestant had to leave the line."

"AND WAS THE SAME RIDDLE ASKED OF THE NEXT PERSON IN THE LINE?"

"Yes."

"SO THE NEXT PERSON HAD EXTRA TIME TO THINK."

"Yes."

"I SEE. IT SOUNDS PRETTY SWELL."

Roland frowned. "Swell?"

"He means it sounds like fun," Susannah said quietly.

Roland shrugged. "It was fun for the onlookers, I suppose, but the contestants took it very seriously. Quite often there were arguments and fistfights after the contest was over and the prize awarded."

"WHAT PRIZE WAS THAT, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?"

"The largest goose in Barony. And year after year my teacher, Cort, carried that goose home."

"I WISH HE WERE HERE," Blaine said respectfully. "HE MUST HAVE BEEN A GREAT RIDDLER."

"Indeed he was," Roland said. "Are you ready for my proposal, Blaine?"

"OF COURSE. I WILL LISTEN WITH GREAT INTEREST, ROLAND OF GILEAD."

"Let these next few hours be our Fair-Day. You will not riddle us, for you wish to hear new riddles, not tell some of those millions you already know—"

"CORRECT."

"We couldn't solve most of them, anyway," Roland went on. "I'm sure you know riddles that would have stumped even Cort, had they been pulled out of the barrel." He was not sure of it at all, but the time to use the fist had passed and the time to use the feather had come.

"OF COURSE," Blaine agreed.

"Instead of a goose, our lives shall be the prize," Roland said. "We will riddle you as we run, Blaine. If, when we come to Topeka, you have solved every one of our riddles, you may carry out your original plan and kill us. That is your goose. But *if we pose you*—if there is a riddle in either Jake's book or one of our heads which you don't know and can't answer—you must take us to Topeka and then free us to pursue our quest. That is *our* goose."

Silence.

"Do you understand?"

"YES."

"Do you agree?"

More silence from Blaine the Mono. Eddie sat stiffly with his arm around Susannah, looking up at the ceiling of the Barony Coach. Susannah's left hand slipped across her belly, stroking the secret which might be hidden there. Jake stroked Oy's fur lightly, avoiding the bloody tangles where the bumbler had been stabbed. They waited while Blaine—the real Blaine, now far behind them, living his quasi-life beneath a city where all the inhabitants lay dead by his hand—considered Roland's proposal.

"YES," Blaine said at last. "I AGREE. IF I SOLVE ALL THE RIDDLES YOU ASK ME, I WILL TAKE YOU WITH ME TO THE PLACE WHERE THE PATH ENDS IN THE CLEARING. IF ONE OF YOU TELLS A RIDDLE I CANNOT SOLVE, I WILL SPARE YOUR LIVES AND LEAVE YOU IN TOPEKA, FROM WHENCE YOU MAY CONTINUE YOUR QUEST FOR THE DARK TOWER, IF YOU SO CHOOSE. HAVE I UNDERSTOOD THE TERMS AND LIMITS OF YOUR PROPOSAL CORRECTLY, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?"

"Yes."

"VERY WELL, ROLAND OF GILEAD.

"VERY WELL, EDDIE OF NEW YORK.

"VERY WELL, SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK.

"VERY WELL, JAKE OF NEW YORK.

"VERY WELL, OY OF MID-WORLD."

Oy looked up briefly at the sound of his name.

"YOU ARE *KA-TET*; ONE MADE FROM MANY. SO AM I. WHOSE *KA-TET* IS THE STRONGER IS SOMETHING WE MUST NOW PROVE."

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the hard steady throb of the slo-trans turbines bearing them on across the waste lands, bearing them along the Path of the Beam toward Topeka, where Mid-World ended and End-World began.

"SO," cried the voice of Blaine. "CAST YOUR NETS, WANDER-ERS! TRY ME WITH YOUR QUESTIONS, AND LET THE CONTEST BEGIN."

PART ONE  
RIDDLES



# beneath the demon Moon (I)

1

The town of Candleton was a poisoned and irradiated ruin, but not dead; after all the centuries it still twitched with 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 build-ings 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, blind and dragging its guts behind it in a sac like a rot-ten 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!" 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. The posse ro-bot 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 Candleton, as one travelled along the Path of the Beam, the radiation levels and concentrations of DEP3 in the soil fell rapidly. Here the mono's track swooped down to 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 wa-ter 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 blind third eye 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 nor-mal—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, then looked up, eyes wide, muzzle dripping. Off in the distance she could hear a low humming sound. A moment later it 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. Before she could even begin to fire her muscles, the distant spark had swelled to a searing wolf'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 en-gines, running at full capacity. There was a blur of pink above the con-crete 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 in the mono's wake, she was still yanked forward almost sev-enty yards, with water dripping from her muzzle and hoofs. Much of her hide (and the boneless fifth leg)



was torn from her body and pulled after Blaine like a discarded garment. There was brief silence, thin as new skin or early ice on a Year's End pond, and then the 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 pawnshop jewelry. 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 beings 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 ill luck to look directly at it.

Now, however, such did not matter. Now there were demons every-where.

## 2

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 something even cooler). Stencilled on it was a simple red drawing which showed a man stepping through the 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. 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 face 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 nuts if you think he's gonna do that,* Susannah thought, but Blaine's reply was quick and eager.

"YES, GUNSLINGER. I 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 General MacArthur," Eddie muttered.

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

"Nothing. 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 slip-pery pup like him? Come on, get real. He's peeking, I guarantee you."

"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 ex-tent. 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 kid who's 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. That's my hope, anyway. 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."

"Does he have blind spots?" Eddie asked.

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

"I like the way you kind of ease us over the rough spots," Eddie said with a thin smile. "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, 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. 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 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 wager. He opened his mouth to say something—an Eddie Dean Special, something that would be both funny and stinging at the same time, the kind of remark that always used to drive his brother Henry dogshit— and then closed it again. Maybe long, tall, and ugly was right; maybe it was time to put away the one-liners and dead baby jokes. Maybe it was finally time to grow up.

3

After three more minutes of murmured consultation and some quick flip-ping 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 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. 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 into the aisle and have his turn. All right?"

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

Roland 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,

Blame."

"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.

"SUSANNAH? ARE YOU THERE, L'IL 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 BET-TER, 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 get him mad," 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 from only one: 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. The trackage has degenerated terribly since the last time we came out this way."

Susannah, who had been on her share of humpy 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," 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. INSO-FAR 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! ONE HOPES SUSANNAH 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. Hitler 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. 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 BE-ING, WHO CRAWLS ON HANDS AND KNEES IN BABYHOOD, WALKS ON 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*, she loathed Blaine. She had an idea she would have felt the same even if he hadn't 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 FRIVOLITY, 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 they were trying to test his capabilities with a spectrum of riddles. Blaine knew . . . and welcomed it.

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

4

"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. What is it?"

"SILENCE, A THING YOU KNOW LITTLE ABOUT, EDDIE OF NEW YORK," Blaine said with no pause at all, and Eddie felt his heart drop a little. 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.

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

"I HOPE YOU HAVE DISCOVERED SOMETHING WHICH WILL HELP YOU," Blaine said, and Eddie thought: *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 them 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 MAY 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: a brief look of complete hopelessness. 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. "Blame 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 to in order to make them and solve them." He turned to Eddie and Susannah, sitting once more with

their arms about one another. "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.

"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. Roland, perhaps hearing the thought, did the best he could. He touched Jake's hair with his diminished hand and ruffled through it. "I think there's always an answer, Jake. The real question is whether or not we'll have time to find the right riddle. He said it took him a little under nine hours to run his route—"

"Eight hours, 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. This chilly rendering of his own likeness had now melted to an unrecognizable hulk. "I still think the answer must be in the book. 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 gun-slinger shoots with his mind. What have you thought of?"

"Nothing." He might have said more, but all at once a strange im-age—a strange

*memory*—intervened: Roland hunkering by Jake at one of their stopping-points on the way to Lud. Both of them 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. 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, 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. It was close, yes, 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 a joke at his expense . . . 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."

"As you will, Eddie." Roland 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 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. 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 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, JAMES TATE, VERONICA MAYS, AND OTHERS. IT IS REMARKABLE HOW HUMAN BE-INGS PITCH THEIR MINDS ON LOVE. YET IT IS CONSTANT FROM ONE LEVEL OF THE TOWER TO THE NEXT, EVEN IN THESE DE-GENERATE DAYS. CONTINUE, ROLAND OF GILEAD."

Susannah's breath resumed. Eddie's hands wanted to clench again, but he wouldn't let them. *Move your flint in closer*, he thought in Ro-land's voice. *Move your flint in closer, for your father's sake!*

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

## CHAPTER II

# THE FALLS OF THE HOUNDS

1

Jake didn't know how easy or difficult Blaine might find the last ten puz-zlers in *Riddle-De-Dum!*, but they looked pretty tough to him. Of course, he reminded himself, he wasn't a thinking-machine with a citywide bank of computers to draw on. All he could do was go for it; God hates a cow-ard, 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). If that one also failed, he'd probably . . . 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 through the crazed maze that was Lud by Gasher; 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 (whatever passed for Topeka in this world). Then they would find the Dark Tower and 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 each other'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 stepped into the aisle and began to try Blaine with riddles from his young days was a sense of doom. It wasn't coming just from the gunslinger; Susannah was sending out the same grim blue-black vibe. Only Eddie wasn't sending it, and that was because he'd 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 felt desperate, like a creature that is pressed deeper and deeper into its final comer by a relent-less 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 in his palm and on his wrist, but the hand itself no longer hurt. He flexed it cau-tiously. 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 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," Blaine said in the drawling voice of John Wayne. "I COULDN'T WATCH A HOUND SUFFER WITH A MASHED-UP FOREPAW LIKE THAT, LET ALONE A FINE LITTLE TRAIL HAND 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 CLASS," 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, dipo-lar nerd. "THE HAND-SCAN SPECTRUM MAGNIFIER IS A DIAG-NOSTIC TOOL ALSO 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."

A long silence from Blaine. 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 WITH-DRAW MY OFFER OF A SEXUAL EXPERIENCE."

*That'll teach me*, Jake thought, raising one hand to cover a 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. Susannah didn't know who Edith Bunker was—*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 gun-slinger like a message in a soap bubble:

*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.

## 2

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 de-celerate, you knew.

"HERE IS SOMETHING YOU REALLY OUGHT TO SEE," Blaine said. He sounded cheerful again, but Jake didn't trust that tone; he had sometimes heard his father start telephone conversations that way (usu-ally 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 a man with 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."

The mono stopped with a barely perceptible jerk. The walls around them once more drained of color and then became transparent. Susannah gasped with 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.

They were halfway across a vast chasm and seemed to be hovering on the moon-dusted air. Beyond them Jake could see a wide, boiling river. Not the Send, 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 had been cut short by urgent calls from his father's Network), look like the kind 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 roar. It was wa-ter—a billion gallons a minute, for all Jake knew—pouring over the lip of the chasm and falling perhaps 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. The level of sound kept climbing. Now Jake's whole head vibrated with it, and as he clapped his hands over his ears, he saw Roland, Eddie, and Susannah do-ing 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 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 going to short out like overstressed stereo speakers.

Then it was over. They still hung above the moon-misty drop, the moonbows still made their slow and dreamlike revolutions before the cur-tain of endlessly falling water, the wet and brutal stone faces of the dog-guardians 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 hear Oy, still barking, and Susannah 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 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 boom-ing 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.*

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

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

"YOU WILL SEE SHORTLY, GUNSLINGER. IN THE MEAN-TIME, 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 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, 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. "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. "Your answer is true, Blaine, 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 AN-OTHER 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, 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 glow-ing blue. Jagged tines of lightning leaped out of them and toward the mono. Then Jake 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 heads. Blaine was feeding himself with it, somehow. *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."

"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.

### 3

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, 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 when you considered that riddling had been such a big deal in the place where Roland had grown up ...

He seemed to read some of this on Jake's face, for a small smile, lemon-bitter, touched the comers 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 junkbin I keep at the back of my mind. Perhaps two thousand. But. . ."

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

"It's not like forgetting. 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 look back at for only a second or two; it was as if he felt burned by her regard. "Like everything else here."

"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.

"Marvelous," Susannah said dryly.

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

"I HAVE A NUMBER OF SWITCHING FUNCTIONS TO PER-FORM. 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 expan-sive, 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.

#### 4

Susannah watched with 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 batteries, and she fancied the lights in the Barony Coach were a little dimmer, but she didn't believe it would make much differ-ence, 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 pas-sengers would be toothpaste either way.

Roland was also slowing down, going deeper and deeper into that mental junkbin 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, Su-sannah had felt a reluctant love for Roland of Gilead, a feeling that seemed a mixture 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 was nonetheless strong. He had, after all, saved Eddie Dean's life and soul; had rescued her beloved. She must love him for that if for nothing else. But she loved him even more, she suspected, for the way he would never, *never* give up. The word *retreat* didn't 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 shiver. Jake sat cross-legged on the floor, looking at the gunslinger with a kind of fierce intensity.

"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 weird 1980s 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 better hurry it up a little, precious,* she thought. The dot on the route map was still closer to Dasherville than 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 up-ward? AN ICICLE.

*Blaine. you say true.*

Man walks over; man walks under; in time of war he bums 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 probably been the one who could stay fresh 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 chuck-led. 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 FUNDAMEN-TAL THINGS APPLY AS TIME GOES BY. WOULD I LIE TO YOU?"

"Yes," Jake muttered.

That apparently struck Blaine's funny bone, because he began to laugh again—the 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 RUIN YOUR EARS WITH MY RISABILITY." "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, 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 now, 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 QUICKLY DRAIN MY BATTERIES, BUT I 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, CROCO-DILE, 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 Blaine'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. Susan-nah hated the sound of its mad laughter, but there was a cynical weariness in this chuckle that 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 FILL YOU IN, IF YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW. PERHAPS EVEN EDDIE. THE POINT, ROLAND, IS THAT I'LL 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. No one cries off."

"CORRECT. NO ONE CRIES OFF."

"All right, Blaine, 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.

Beneath them, the mono's slo-trans engines continued to cycle up-mat 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 Blame, and I think he knows it. I think he knew it an hour ago.*

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

And so the contest would continue, Susannah realized, 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.

# CHAPTER III

## the fair-day goose

### 1

Eddie Dean—who did not know Roland sometimes thought of him as *ka mai, ka's* fool—heard all of it and heard none of it; saw all of it and saw none of it. The only thing to really make an impression on him once the riddling began in earnest was the fire flashing from the stone eyes of the Hounds; as he raised his hand to shield his eyes from that chain-lightning glare, he thought of the Portal of the Beam in the Clearing of the Bear, how he had pressed his ear against it and heard the distant, dreamy rumble of machinery.

Watching the eyes of the Hounds light up, listening as Blaine drew that current into his batteries, powering up for his final plunge across Mid-World, Eddie had thought: *Not all is silent in the halls of the dead and the rooms of ruin. Even now some of the stuff the Old Ones left be-hind still works. And that's really the horror of it, wouldn't 't you say? Yes. The exact horror of it.*

Eddie had been with his friends for a short time after that, mentally as well as physically, but then he had fallen back into his thoughts again. *Eddie's zonin.* Henry would have said. *Let 'im be.*

It was the image of Jake striking flint and steel that kept recurring; he would allow his mind to dwell on it for a second or two, like a bee alight-ing on some sweet flower, and then he would take off again. Because that memory wasn't what he wanted; it was just the way *in* to what he wanted, another door like the ones on the beach of the Western Sea, or the one he had scraped in the dirt of the speaking ring before they had drawn Jake.. . only this door was in his mind. What he wanted was behind it; what he was doing was kind of... well... diddling the lock.

Zoning, in Henry-speak.

His brother had spent most of his time putting Eddie down—because Henry had been afraid of him and jealous of him, Eddie had finally come to realize—but he remembered one day when Henry had stunned him by saying something that was nice. *Better* than nice, actually; mind-boggling.

A bunch of them had been sitting in the alley behind Dahlie's, some of them eating Popsicles and Hoodsie Rockets, some of them smoking Kents from a pack Jimmie Polino—Jimmie Polio, they had all called him, because he had that fucked-up thing wrong with him, that clubfoot—had hawked out of his mother's dresser drawer. Henry, predictably enough, had been one of the ones smoking.

There were certain ways of referring to things in the gang Henry was a part of (and which Eddie, as his little brother, was also a part of); the ar-got of their miserable little *ka-tet*. In Henry's gang, you never beat anyone else up; you *sent em home with a fuckin rupture*. You never made out with a girl; *you fucked that skag til she cried*. You never got stoned; you *went on a fuckin bombin-run*. And you never brawled with another gang; you *got in a fuckin piss*.

The discussion that day had been about who you'd want with you if you got in a fuckin piss. Jimmie Polio (he got to talk first because he had supplied the cigarettes, which Henry's homeboys called *the fuckin cancer-sticks*) opted for Skipper Brannigan, because, he said, Skipper wasn't afraid of anyone. One time, Jimmie said, Skipper got pissed off at this teacher—at the Friday night PAL dance, this was—and beat the living shit out of him. Sent *THE FUCKIN CHAPERONE* home with a fuckin rupture, if you could dig it. That was his homie Skipper Brannigan.

Everyone listened to this solemnly, nodding their heads as they ate their Rockets, sucked their Popsicles, or smoked their Kents. Everyone knew that Skipper Brannigan was a fuckin pussy and Jimmie was full of shit, but no one said so. Christ, no. If they didn't pretend to believe Jim-mie Polio's outrageous lies, no one would pretend to believe theirs.

Tommy Fredericks opted for John Parelli. Georgie Pratt went for Csaba Drabnik, also known around the nabe as The Mad Fuckin Hun-garian. Frank Duganelli nominated Larry McCain, even though Larry was in Juvenile Detention; Larry fuckin *ruled*, Frank said.

By then it was around to Henry Dean. He gave the question the weighty

consideration it deserved, then put his arm around his surprised brother's shoulders. *Eddie, he said. My little bro. He's the man.*

They all stared at him, stunned—and none more stunned than Eddie. His jaw had been almost down to his belt-buckle. And then Jimmie Polio said. *Come on. Henry, stop fuckin around. This a serious question. Who 'd you want watching your hack if the shit was gonna come down?*

*I am being serious.* Henry had replied.

*Why Eddie?* Georgie Pratt had asked, echoing the question which had been in Eddie's own mind. *He couldn't 't fight his way out of a paper bag. A wet one. So why the fuck?*

Henry thought some more—not, Eddie was convinced, because he didn't know why, but because he had to think about how to articulate it. Then he said: *Because when Eddie's in that fuckin zone, he could talk the devil into setting himself on fire.*

The image of Jake returned, one memory stepping on another. Jake scraping steel on flint, flashing sparks at the kindling of their campfire, sparks that fell short and died before they lit.

*He could talk the devil into setting himself on fire.*

*Move your flint in closer,* Roland said, and now there was a third memory, one of Roland at the door they'd come to at the end of the beach, Roland burning with fever, close to death, shaking like a maraca, cough-ing, his blue bombardier's eyes fixed on Eddie, Roland saying, *Come a little closer, Eddie—come a little closer for your father's sake!*

*Because he wanted to grab me,* Eddie thought. Faintly, almost as if it were coming through one of those magic doors from some other world, he heard Blaine telling them that the endgame had commenced; if they had been saving their best riddles, now was the time to trot them out. They had an hour.

*An hour! Only an hour!*

His mind tried to fix on that and Eddie nudged it away. Something was happening inside him (at least he prayed it was), some desperate game of association, and he couldn't let his mind get fucked up with deadlines and consequences and all that crap; if he did, he'd lose what-ever chance he had. It was, in a way, like seeing something in a piece of wood, something you could carve out—a bow, a slingshot, perhaps a key to open some unimaginable door. You couldn't look too long,

though, at least to start with. You'd lose it if you did. It was almost as if you had to carve while your own back was turned.

He could feel Blaine's engines powering up beneath him. In his mind's eye he saw the flint flash against the steel, and in his mind's ear he heard Roland telling Jake to move the flint in closer. *And don't hit it with the steel, Jake; scrape it.*

*Why am I here? If this isn't what I want, why does my mind keep coming back to this place?*

*Because it's as close as I can get and still stay out of the hurt-zone. Only a medium-sized hurt, actually, but it made me think of Henry. Being put down by Henry.*

*Henry said you could talk the devil into setting himself on fire.*

*Yes. I always loved him for that. That was great.*

And now Eddie saw Roland move Jake's hands, one holding flint and the other steel, closer to the kindling. Jake was nervous. Eddie could see it; Roland had seen it, too. And in order to ease his nerves, take his mind off the responsibility of lighting the fire, Roland had—

*He asked the kid a riddle.*

Eddie Dean blew breath into the keyhole of his memory. And this time the tumblers turned.

## 2

The green dot was closing in on Topeka, and for the first time Jake felt vibration ... as if the track beneath them had decayed to a point where Blaine's compensators could no longer completely handle the problem. With the sense of vibration there at last came a feeling of speed. The walls and ceiling of the Barony Coach were still opaqued, but Jake found he didn't need to see the countryside blurring past to imagine it. Blaine was rolling full out now, leading his last sonic boom across the waste lands to the place where Mid-World ended, and Jake also found it easy to imagine the transteel piers at the end of the monorail. They would be painted in di-agonal stripes of yellow and black. He didn't know how he knew that, but he did.

"TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES," Blaine said complacently. "WOULD YOU TRY ME AGAIN, GUNSLINGER?"

"I think not, Blaine." Roland sounded exhausted. "I've done with you; you've beaten me. Jake?"

Jake got to his feet and faced the route-map. In his chest his heartbeat seemed very slow but very hard, each pulse like a fist slamming on a drumhead. Oy crouched between his feet, looking anxiously up into his face.

"Hello, Blaine," Jake said, and wet his lips.

"HELLO, JAKE OF NEW YORK." The voice was kindly—the voice, perhaps, of a nice old fellow with a habit of molesting the children he from time to time leads into the bushes. "WOULD YOU TRY ME WITH RIDDLES FROM YOUR BOOK? OUR TIME TOGETHER GROWS SHORT."

"Yes," Jake said. "I would try you with these riddles. Give me your understanding of the truth concerning each, Blaine."

"IT IS FAIRLY SPOKEN, JAKE OF NEW YORK. I WILL DO AS YOU ASK."

Jake opened the book to the place he had been keeping with his finger. Ten riddles. Eleven, counting Samson's riddle, which he was saving for last. If Blaine answered them all (as Jake now believed he probably would), Jake would sit down next to Roland, take Oy onto his lap, and wait for the end. There were, after all, other worlds than these.

"Listen, Blaine: In a tunnel of darkness lies a beast of iron. It can only attack when pulled back. What is it?"

"A BULLET." No hesitation.

"Walk on the living, they don't even mumble. Walk on the dead, they mutter and grumble. What are they?"

"FALLEN LEAVES." No hesitation, and if Jake really knew in his heart that the game was lost, why did he feel such despair, such bitterness, such anger?

*Because he's a pain, that's why. Blaine is a really BIG pain, and I'd like to push his face in it, just once. I think even making him stop is second to that on my wish-list.*

Jake turned the page. He was very close to *Riddle-De-Dum's* tom-out answer section now; he could feel it under his finger, a kind of jagged lump. Very close to the end of the book. He thought of Aaron Deepneau in the Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind, Aaron Deepneau telling him to come back anytime, play a little chess, and oh just by the way, old fatso made a pretty good cup of coffee. A wave of homesickness so strong it was like dying swept over him. He felt he would have

sold his soul for a look at New York; hell, he would have sold it for one deep lung-filling breath of Forty-second Street at rush hour.

He fought it off and went to the next riddle.

"I am emeralds and diamonds, lost by the moon. I am found by the sun and picked up soon. What am I?"

"DEW."

Still relentless. Still unhesitating.

The green dot grew closer to Topeka, closing the last of the distance on the route-map. One after another, Jake posed his riddles; one after another, Blaine answered them. When Jake turned to the last page, he saw a boxed message from the author or editor or whatever you called someone who put together books like this: *We hope you've enjoyed the unique combination of imagination and logic known as RIDDLING!*

*I haven't*, Jake thought. *I haven't enjoyed it one little bit, and I hope you choke.*

Yet when he looked at the question above the message, he felt a thin thread of hope. It seemed to him that, in this case, at least, they really *had* saved the best for last.

On the route-map, the green dot was now no more than a finger's width from Topeka.

"Hurry up, Jake," Susannah murmured.

"Blaine?"

"YES, JAKE OF NEW YORK."

"With no wings, I fly. With no eyes, I see. With no arms, I climb. More frightening than any beast, stronger than any foe. I am cunning, ruthless, and tall; in the end, I rule all. What am I?"

The gunslinger had looked up, blue eyes gleaming. Susannah began to turn her expectant face from Jake to the route-map. Yet Blaine's answer was as prompt as ever: "THE IMAGINATION OF MAN AND WOMAN."

Jake briefly considered arguing, then thought, *Why waste our time?* As always, the answer, when it was right, seemed almost self-evident. "Thankee-sai, Blaine, you speak true."

"AND THE FAIR-DAY GOOSE IS ALMOST MINE, I WOT. NINETEEN MINUTES AND FIFTY SECONDS TO TERMINATION. WOULD YOU SAY MORE, JAKE OF NEW YORK? VISUAL SENSORS INDICATE YOU HAVE



COME TO THE END OF YOUR BOOK, WHICH WAS NOT, I MUST SAY, AS GOOD AS I HAD HOPED."

"Everybody's a goddam critic," Susannah said sotto voce. She wiped a tear from the corner of one eye; without looking directly at her, the gun-slinger took her free hand. She clasped it tightly.

"Yes, Blaine, I have one more," Jake said.

"EXCELLENT."

"Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came sweetness."

"THIS RIDDLE COMES FROM THE HOLY BOOK KNOWN AS 'OLD TESTAMENT BIBLE OF KING JAMES.'" Blaine sounded amused, and Jake felt the last of his hope slip away. He thought he might cry—not so much out of fear as frustration. "IT WAS MADE BY SAM-SON THE STRONG. THE EATER IS A LION; THE SWEETNESS IS HONEY, MADE BY BEES WHICH HIVED IN THE LION'S SKULL. NEXT? YOU STILL HAVE OVER EIGHTEEN MINUTES, JAKE."

Jake shook his head. He let go of *Riddle-De-Dum!* and smiled when Oy caught it neatly in his jaws and then stretched his long neck up to Jake, holding it out again.

"I've told them all. I'm done."

"SHUCKS, L'IL TRAILHAND, THAT'S A PURE-D SHAME," Blaine said. Jake found this drawly John Wayne imitation all but unbearable in their current circumstances. "LOOKS LIKE I WIN THAT THAR GOOSE, UNLESS SOMEBODY ELSE CARES TO SPEAK UP. WHAT ABOUT YOU, OY OF MID-WORLD? GOT ANY RIDDLES, MY LIT-TLE BUMBLER BUDDY?"

"Oy!" the billy-bumbler responded, his voice muffled by the book. Still smiling, Jake took it and sat down next to Roland, who put an arm around him.

"SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK?"

She shook her head, not looking up. She had turned Roland's hand over in her own, and was gently tracing the healed stumps where his first two fingers had been.

"ROLAND SON OF STEVEN? HAVE YOU REMEMBERED ANY OTHERS FROM THE FAIR-DAY RIDDLINGS OF GILEAD?"

Roland also shook his head . . . and then Jake saw that Eddie Dean was raising his. There was a peculiar smile on Eddie's face, a peculiar shine in Eddie's eyes, and Jake found that hope hadn't deserted him, after all. It suddenly flowered anew in

his mind, red and hot and vivid. Like . . . well, like a rose. A rose in the full fever of its summer.

"Blaine?" Eddie asked in a low tone. To Jake his voice sounded queerly choked.

"YES, EDDIE OF NEW YORK." Unmistakable disdain.

"I have a couple of riddles," Eddie said. "Just to pass the time between here and Topeka, you understand." No, Jake realized, Eddie didn't sound as if he were choking; he sounded as if he were trying to hold back laughter.

"SPEAK, EDDIE OF NEW YORK."



Sitting and listening to Jake run through the last of his riddles, Eddie had mused on Roland's tale of the Fair-Day goose. From there his mind had returned to Henry, travelling from Point A to Point B through the magic of associative thinking. Or, if you wanted to get Zen about it, via Trans-Bird Airlines: goose to turkey. He and Henry had once had a discussion about getting off heroin. Henry had claimed that going cold turkey wasn't the only way; there was also, he said, such a thing as going *cool* turkey. Eddie asked Henry what you called a hype who had just administered a hot shot to himself, and, without missing a beat, Henry had said. *You call that baked turkey.* How they had laughed . . . but now, all this long, strange time later, it looked very much as if the joke was going to be on the younger Dean brother, not to mention the younger Dean brother's new friends. Looked like they were all going to be baked turkey before much longer.

*Unless you can yank it out of the zone.*

Yes.

*Then do it, Eddie.* It was Henry's voice again, that old resident of his head, but now Henry sounded sober and clear-minded. Henry sounded like his friend instead of his enemy, as if all the old conflicts were finally settled, all the old hatchets buried. *Do it—make the devil set himself on fire. It 'll hurt a little, maybe, but you've hurt worse. Hell, I hurt you worse myself, and you survived. Survived just fine. And you know where to look.*

Of course. In their palaver around the campfire Jake had finally managed to light. Roland had asked the kid a riddle to loosen him up, Jake had struck a spark into the kindling, and then they had all sat around the fire, talking. Talking and riddling.

Eddie knew something else, too. Blaine had answered hundreds of riddles as they ran southeast along the Path of the Beam, and the others believed that he had answered every single one of them without hesitation. Eddie had thought much the same . . . but now, as he cast his mind back over the contest, he realized an interesting thing: Blaine *had* hesitated.

Once.

*He was pissed, too. Like Roland was.*

The gunslinger, although often exasperated by Eddie, had shown real anger toward him just a single time after the business of carving the key, when Eddie had almost choked. Roland had tried to cover the depth of that anger—make it seem like nothing but more exasperation—but Eddie had sensed what was underneath. He had lived with Henry Dean for a long time, and was still exquisitely attuned to all the negative emotions. It had hurt him, too—not Roland's anger itself, exactly, but the contempt with which it had been laced. Contempt had always been one of Henry's favorite weapons.

*Why did the dead baby cross the road? Eddie had asked. Because it was stapled to the chicken, nyuck-nyuck-nyuck!*

Later, when Eddie had tried to defend his riddle, arguing that it was tasteless but not pointless, Roland's response had been strangely like Blaine's: */ don't care about taste. It's senseless and unsolvable, and that's what makes it silly. A good riddle is neither.*

But as Jake finished riddling Blaine, Eddie realized a wonderful, lib-erating thing: that word *good* was up for grabs. Always had been, always would be. Even if the man using it was maybe a thousand years old and could shoot like Buffalo Bill, that word was still up for grabs. Roland himself had admitted he had never been very good at the riddling game. His tutor claimed that Roland thought too deeply; his father thought it was lack of imagination. Whatever the reason, Roland of Gilead had never won a Fair-Day riddling. He had survived all his contemporaries, and that was certainly a prize of sorts, but he had never carried home a prize goose. *I could always haul a gun faster than any of my mates, but I've never been much good at thinking around corners.*

Eddie remembered trying to tell Roland that jokes were riddles de-signed to help you build up that often overlooked talent, but Roland had ignored him. The way, Eddie supposed, a color-blind person would ig-nore someone's description of a rainbow.

Eddie thought Blaine also might have trouble thinking around comers. He realized he could hear Blaine asking the others if they had any more riddles—even asking Oy. He could hear the mockery in Blaine's voice, could hear it very well. Sure he could. Because he was coming back. Back from that fabled zone. Back to see if he could talk the devil into setting himself on fire. No gun would help this time, but maybe that was all right. Maybe that was all right

because—

*Because I shoot with my mind. My mind. God help me to shoot this overblown calculator with my mind. Help me shoot it from around the corner.*

"Blaine?" he said, and then, when the computer had acknowledged him: "I have a couple of riddles." As he spoke, he discovered a wonderful thing: he was struggling to hold back laughter.

4

"SPEAK, EDDIE OF NEW YORK."

No time to tell the others to be on their guard, that anything might happen, and from the look of them, no need, either. Eddie forgot about them and turned his full attention to Blaine.

"What has four wheels and flies?"

"THE TOWN GARBAGE WAGON, AS I HAVE ALREADY SAID."

Disapproval—and dislike? Yeah, probably—all but oozing out of that voice.

"ARE YOU SO STUPID OR INATTENTIVE THAT YOU DO NOT REMEMBER? IT WAS THE FIRST RIDDLE YOU ASKED ME."

*Yes, Eddie thought. And what we all missed—because we were fixated on stumping you with some brain-buster out of Roland's past or Jake's book—is that the contest almost ended right there.*

"You didn't like that one, did you, Blaine?"

"I FOUND IT EXCEEDINGLY STUPID," Blaine agreed. "PER-HAPS THAT'S WHY YOU ASKED IT AGAIN. LIKE CALLS TO LIKE, EDDIE OF NEW YORK, IS IT NOT SO?"

A smile lit Eddie's face; he shook his finger at the route-map. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Or, as we used to say back in the neighborhood, 'You can rank me to the dogs and back, but I'll never lose the hard-on I use to fuck your mother.' "

"Hurry up!" Jake whispered at him. "If you can do something, *do it!*"

"It doesn't like silly questions," Eddie said. "It doesn't like silly games. And we *knew* that. We knew it from *Charlie the Choo-Choo*. How stupid can you get? Hell, *that* was the book with the answers, not *Riddle-De-Dum*, but we never saw it."

Eddie searched for the other riddle that had been in Jake's Final Essay, found it, posed it.

"Blaine: when is a door not a door?"

Once again, for the first time since Susannah had asked Blaine what had four legs and flies, there came a peculiar clicking sound, like a man popping his tongue on the roof of his mouth. The pause was briefer than the one which had followed Susannah's opening riddle, but it was still there—Eddie heard it. "WHEN IT'S A JAR, OF COURSE" Blaine said. He sounded dour, unhappy. "THIRTEEN MINUTES AND FIVE SEC-ONDS REMAIN BEFORE TERMINATION, EDDIE OF NEW YORK-WOULD YOU DIE WITH SUCH STUPID RIDDLES IN YOUR MOUTH?"

Eddie sat bolt upright, staring at the route-map, and although he could feel warm trickles of sweat running down his back, that smile on his face widened.

"Quit your whining, pal. If you want the privilege of smearing us all over the landscape, you'll just have to put up with a few riddles that aren't quite up to your standards of logic."

"YOU MUST NOT SPEAK TO ME IN SUCH A MANNER."

"Or what? You'll kill me? Don't make me laugh. Just play. You agreed to the game; now play it."

Thin pink light flashed briefly out of the route-map. "You're making him angry," Little Blaine mourned. "Oh, you're making him *so* angry."

"Get lost, squirt," Eddie said, not unkindly, and when the pink glow receded, once again revealing a flashing green dot that was almost on top of Topeka, Eddie said: "Answer this one, Blaine: the big moron and the little moron were standing on the bridge over the River Send. The big mo-ron fell off. How come the little moron didn't fall off, too?"

"THAT IS UNWORTHY OF OUR CONTEST. I WILL NOT AN-SWER." On the last word Blaine's voice actually dropped into a lower register, making him sound like a fourteen-year-old coping with a change of voice.

Roland's eyes were not just gleaming now but blazing. "What do you say, Blaine? I would understand you well. Are you saying that you cry off?"

"NO! OF COURSE NOT! BUT—"

"Then answer, if you can. Answer the riddle."

"IT'S *NOT* A RIDDLE!" Blaine almost bleated. "IT'S A JOKE, SOMETHING

FOR STUPID CHILDREN TO CACKLE OVER IN THE PLAY YARD!"

"Answer now or I declare the contest over and our *ka-tet* the winner," Roland said. He spoke in the dryly confident tone of authority Eddie had first heard in the town of River Crossing. "You must answer, for it is stupidity you complain of, not transgression of the rules, which we agreed upon mutually."

Another of those clicking sounds, but this time it was much louder— so loud, in fact, that Eddie winced. Oy flattened his ears against his skull. It was followed by the longest pause yet; three seconds, at least. Then:

"THE LITTLE MORON DID NOT FALL OFF BECAUSE HE WAS A LITTLE MORE ON." Blaine sounded sulky. "MORE PHONETIC CO-INCIDENCE. TO EVEN ANSWER SUCH AN UNWORTHY RIDDLE MAKES ME FEEL SOILED."

Eddie held up his right hand. He rubbed the thumb and forefinger together.

"WHAT DOES THAT SIGNIFY, FOOLISH CREATURE?"

"It's the world's smallest violin, playing 'My Heart Pumps Purple Piss for You,' " Eddie said. Jake fell into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. "But never mind the cheap New York humor; back to the contest. Why do police lieutenants wear belts?"

The lights in the Barony Coach began to flicker. An odd thing was happening to the walls, as well; they began to fade in and out of true, lunging toward transparency, perhaps, and then opaquing again. Seeing this phenomenon even out of the corner of his eye made Eddie feel a bit whoopsy.

"Blaine? Answer."

"Answer," Roland agreed. "Answer, or I declare the contest at an end and hold you to your promise."

Something touched Eddie's elbow. He looked down and saw Susan-nah's small and shapely hand. He took it, squeezed it, smiled at her. He hoped the smile was more confident than the man making it felt. They were going to win the contest—he was almost sure of that—but he had no idea what Blaine would do if and when they did.

"TO ... TO HOLD UP THEIR PANTS?" Blaine's voice firmed, and repeated the question as a statement. "TO HOLD UP THEIR PANTS. A RIDDLE BASED UPON THE EXAGGERATED SIMPLICITY OF—"

"Right. Good one, Blaine, but never mind trying to kill time—it won't work.

Next—"

"I INSIST YOU STOP ASKING THESE SILLY—"

"Then stop the mono," Eddie said. "If you're that upset, stop right here, and I will."

"NO."

"Okay, then, on we go. What's Irish and stays out in back of the house, even in the rain?"

There was another of those clicks, this time so loud it felt like having a blunt spike driven against his eardrum. A pause of five seconds. Now the flashing green dot on the route-map was so close to Topeka that it lit the word like neon each time it flashed. Then: "PADDY O'FURNITURE."

The correct answer to a joke-riddle Eddie had first heard in the alley behind Dahlie's, or at some similar gathering-point, but Blaine had apparently paid a price for forcing his mind into a channel that could conceive it: the Barony Coach lights were flashing more wildly than ever, and Eddie could hear a low humming from inside the walls—the kind of sound your stereo amp made just before its shit blew up.

Pink light stuttered from the route-map. "Stop!" Little Blaine cried, his voice so wavery it sounded like the voice of a character from an old Warner Bros. cartoon.

"Stop it, you're killing him!"

*What do you think he's trying to do to us, squirt?* Eddie thought.

He considered shooting Blaine one Jake had told while they'd been sitting around the campfire that night—What's green, weighs a hundred tons, and lives at the bottom of the ocean? Moby Snot!—and then didn't. He wanted to stick further inside the bounds of logic than that one allowed . . . and he could do it. He didn't think he would have to get much more surreal than the level of, say, a third-grader with a fair-to-good collection of Garbage Pail Kids cards in order to fuck Blaine up royally ... and permanently. Because no matter how many emotions his fancy bipolar circuits had allowed him to mimic, *he* was still an *it*—a computer. Even following Eddie this far into riddledom's Twilight Zone had caused Blaine's sanity to totter.

"Why do people go to bed, Blaine?"

"BECAUSE ... BECAUSE ... GODS DAMN YOU, BECAUSE ..."

A low squalling started up from beneath them, and suddenly the Barony Coach swayed violently from right to left. Susannah screamed. Jake was thrown into her



lap. The gunslinger grabbed them both.

"BECAUSE THE BED WON'T COME TO THEM, GODS DAMN YOU! NINE MINUTES AND FIFTY SECONDS!"

"Give up, Blaine," Eddie said. "Stop before I have to blow your mind completely. If you don't quit, it's going to happen. We both know it."

"NO!"

"I got a million of these puppies. Been hearing them my whole life.

They stick to my mind the way flies stick to flypaper. Hey, with some people it's recipes. So what do you say? Want to give?"

"NO! NINE MINUTES AND THIRTY SECONDS!"

"Okay, Blaine. You asked for it. Here comes the cruncher. Why did the dead baby cross the road?"

The mono took another of those gigantic lurches; Eddie didn't understand how it could still stay on its track after that, but somehow it did. The screaming from beneath them grew louder; the walls, floor, and ceiling of the car began to cycle madly between opacity and transparency. At one moment they were enclosed, at the next they were rushing over a gray daylight landscape that stretched flat and featureless to a horizon which ran across the world in a straight line.

The voice which came from the speakers was now that of a panicky child: "I KNOW IT, JUST A MOMENT, I KNOW IT, RETRIEVAL IN PROGRESS, ALL LOGIC CIRCUITS IN USE—"

"Answer," Roland said.

"I NEED MORE TIME! YOU MUST GIVE IT TO ME!" Now there was a kind of cracked triumph in that splintered voice. "NO TEMPORAL LIMITS FOR ANSWERING WERE SET, ROLAND OF GILEAD, HATEFUL GUNSLINGER OUT OF A PAST THAT SHOULD HAVE STAYED DEAD!"

"No," Roland agreed, "no time limits were set, you are quite right. But you may not kill us with a riddle still unanswered, Blaine, and Topeka draws nigh.

Answer!"

The Barony Coach cycled into invisibility again, and Eddie saw what appeared to be a tall and rusty grain elevator go flashing past; it was in his view barely long enough for him to identify it. Now he fully appreciated the maniacal speed at which they were travelling; perhaps three hundred miles faster than a commercial jet at cruising speed.

"Let him alone!" moaned the voice of Little Blaine. "You're killing him, I say! *Killing him!*"

"Isn't that 'bout what he wanted?" Susannah asked in the voice of Detta Walker. "To die? That's what he said. We don't mind, either. You not so bad, Little Blaine, but even a world as fucked up as this one has to be better with your big brother gone. It's just him takin us with him we been objectin to all this time."

"Last chance," Roland said. "Answer or give up the goose, Blaine."

"I ... I ... YOU ... SIXTEEN LOG THIRTY-THREE ... ALL COSINE SUBSCRIPTS ... ANTI ... ANTI ... IN ALL THESE YEARS ... BEAM ... FLOOD ... PYTHAGOREAN ... CARTESIAN LOGIC ... CAN I ... DARE I ... A PEACH ... EAT A PEACH ... ALLMAN BROTHERS ... PATRICIA ... CROCODILE AND WHIPLASH SMILE ... CLOCK OF DIALS ... TICK-TOCK, ELEVEN O'CLOCK, THE MAN'S IN THE MOON AND HE'S READY TO ROCK ... *INCESSAMENT* ... *INCESSAMENT, MON CHER* ... OH MY HEAD ... BLAINE ... BLAINE DARES ... BLAINE WILL ANSWER ... I ..."

Blaine, now screaming in the voice of an infant, lapsed into some other language and began to sing. Eddie thought it was French. He knew none of the words, but when the drums kicked in, he knew the song perfectly well: "Velcro Fly" by Z.Z. Top.

The glass over the route-map blew out. A moment later, the route-map itself exploded from its socket, revealing twinkling lights and a maze of circuit-boards behind it. The lights pulsed in time to the drums. Suddenly blue fire flashed out, sizzling the surface around the hole in the wall where the map had been, scorching it black. From deeper within that wall, toward Blaine's blunt, bullet-shaped snout, came a thick grinding noise.

"It crossed the road because it was stapled to the chicken, you dopey fuck!" Eddie yelled. He got to his feet and started to walk toward the smoking hole where the route-map had been. Susannah grabbed at the back of his shirt, but Eddie barely felt it. Barely knew where he was, in fact. The battle-fire had dropped over him, burning him everywhere with its righteous heat, sizzling his sight, frying his synapses and roasting his heart in its holy glow. He had Blaine in his sights, and although the thing behind the voice was already mortally wounded, he was unable to stop squeezing the trigger: *I shoot with my mind.*

"What's the difference between a truckload of bowling balls and a truckload of

dead woodchucks?" Eddie raved. "You can't unload a truck-load of bowling balls with a pitchfork!"

A terrible shriek of mingled anger and agony issued from the hole where the route-map had been. It was followed by a gust of blue fire, as if somewhere forward of Barony Coach an electric dragon had exhaled violently. Jake called a warning, but Eddie didn't need it; his reflexes had been replaced with razor-blades. He ducked, and the burst of electricity went over his right shoulder, making the hair on that side of his neck stand up. He drew the gun he wore—a heavy .45 with a worn sandalwood grip, one of two revolvers which Roland had brought out of Mid-World's ruin. He kept walking as he bore down on the front of the coach . . . and of course he kept talking. As Roland had said, Eddie would *die* talking. As his old friend Cuthbert had done. Eddie could think of many worse ways to go, and only one better.

"Say, Blaine, you ugly, sadistic fuck! Since we're talking riddles, what is the greatest riddle of the Orient? Many men smoke but Fu Manchu! Get it? No? So solly, Cholly! How about this one? Why'd the woman name her son Seven and a Half? Because she drew his name out of a hat!"

He had reached the pulsing square. Now he lifted Roland's gun and the Barony Coach suddenly filled with its thunder. He put all six rounds into the hole, fanning the hammer with the flat of his hand in the way Roland had shown them, knowing only that this was right, this was proper . . . this was *ka*, goddammit, fucking *ka*, it was the way you ended things if you were a gunslinger. He was one of Roland's tribe, all right, his soul was probably damned to the deepest pit of hell, and he wouldn't have changed it for all the heroin in Asia.

"I HATE YOU!" Blaine cried in his childish voice. The splinters were gone from it now; it was growing soft, mushy. "I HATE YOU FOREVER!"

"It's not dying that bothers you, is it?" Eddie asked. The lights in the hole where the route-map had been were fading. More blue fire flashed, but he hardly had to pull his head back to avoid it; the flame was small and weak. Soon Blaine would be as dead as all the Pubes and Grays in Lud. "It's *losing* that bothers you."

"HATE . . . FORRRRmr . . ."

The word degenerated into a hum. The hum became a kind of stuttery thudding sound. Then it was gone.

Eddie looked around. Roland was there, holding Susannah with one arm curved

around her butt, as one might hold a child. Her thighs clasped his waist. Jake stood on the gunslinger's other side, with Oy at his heel.

Drifting out of the hole where the route-map had been was a peculiar charred smell, somehow not unpleasant. To Eddie it smelled like burning leaves in October. Otherwise, the hole was as dead and dark as a corpse's eye. All the lights in there had gone out.

*Your goose is cooked, Blaine*, Eddie thought, *and your turkey's baked. Happy fuckin Thanksgiving.*

## 5

The shrieking from beneath the mono stopped. There was one final, grinding thud from up front, and then those sounds ceased, too. Roland felt his legs and hips sway gently forward and put out his free hand to steady himself. His body knew what had happened before his head did:

Blaine's engines had quit. They were now simply gliding forward along the track. But—

"Back," he said. "All the way. We're coasting. If we're close enough to Blaine's termination point, we may still crash."

He led them past the puddled remains of Blaine's welcoming ice sculpture and to the back of the coach. "And stay away from that thing," he said, pointing at the instrument which looked like a cross between a piano and a harpsichord. It stood on a small platform. "It may shift. Gods, I wish we could see where we are! Lie down. Wrap your arms over your heads."

They did as he told them. Roland did the same. He lay there with his chin pressing into the nap of the royal blue carpet, eyes shut, thinking about what had just happened.

"I cry your pardon, Eddie," he said. "How the wheel of *ka* turns! Once I had to ask the same of my friend Cuthbert . . . and for the same reason. There's a kind of blindness in me. An *arrogant* blindness."

"I hardly think there's any need of pardon-crying," Eddie said. He sounded uncomfortable.

"There is. I held your jokes in contempt. Now they have saved our lives. I cry your pardon. I have forgotten the face of my father."

"You don't need any pardon and you didn't forget anybody's face," Eddie said.

"You can't help your nature, Roland."

The gunslinger considered this carefully, and discovered something which was wonderful and awful at the same time: that idea had never occurred to him. Not once in his whole life. That he was a captive of *ka*— this he had known since earliest childhood. But his *nature* ... his very *nature* ..

"Thank you, Eddie. I think—"

Before Roland could say what he thought, Blaine the Mono crashed to a final bitter halt. All four of them were thrown violently up Barony Coach's central aisle, Oy in Jake's arms and barking. The cabin's front wall buckled and Roland struck it shoulder-first. Even with the padding (the wall was carpeted and, from the feel, undercoated with some resilient stuff), the blow was hard enough to numb him. The chandelier swung forward and tore loose from the ceiling, pelting them with glass pendants. Jake rolled aside, vacating its landing-zone just in time. The harpsichord-piano flew off its podium, struck one of the sofas, and overturned, coming to rest with a discordant *brrrannnggg* sound. The mono tilted to the right and the gunslinger braced himself, meaning to cover both Jake and Susannah with his own body if it overturned completely. Then it settled back, the floor still a little canted, but at rest.

The trip was over.

The gunslinger raised himself up. His shoulder was still numb, but the arm below it supported him, and that was a good sign. On his left, Jake was sitting up and picking glass beads out of his lap with a dazed expression. On his right, Susannah was dabbing a cut under Eddie's left eye. "All right," Roland said. "Who's hurt—" There was an explosion from above them, a hollow *Pow!* that reminded Roland of the big-bangers Cuthbert and Alain had sometimes lit and tossed down drains, or into the privies behind the scullery for a prank. And once Cuthbert had shot some big-bangers with his sling. That had been no prank, no childish folly. That had been—

Susannah uttered a short cry—more of surprise than fear, the gun-slinger thought—and then hazy daylight was shining down on his face. It felt good. The taste of the air coming in through the blown emergency exit was even better—sweet with the smell of rain and damp earth.

There was a bony rattle, and a ladder—it appeared to be equipped with rungs

made of twisted steel wire—dropped out of a slot up there.

"First they throw the chandelier at you, then they show you the door," Eddie said. He struggled to his feet, then got Susannah up. "Okay, I know when I'm not wanted. Let's make like bees and buzz off."

"Sounds good to me." She reached toward the cut on Eddie's face again. Eddie took her fingers, kissed them, and told her to stop poking the merchandise.

"Jake?" the gunslinger asked. "Okay?"

"Yes," Jake said. "What about you, Oy?"

"Oy!"

"Guess he is," Jake said. He raised his wounded hand and looked at it ruefully.

"Hurting again, is it?" the gunslinger asked.

"Yeah. Whatever Blaine did to it is wearing off. I don't care, though—I'm just glad to still be alive."

"Yes. Life is good. So is *astin*. There's some of it left."

"Aspirin, you mean."

Roland nodded. A pill of magical properties, but one of the words from Jake's world he would never be able to say correctly.

"Nine out of ten doctors recommend Anacin, honey," Susannah said, and when Jake only looked at her quizzically: "Guess they don't use that one anymore in your when, huh? Doesn't matter. We're here, sugarpie, right here and just fine, and that's what matters." She pulled Jake into her arms and gave him a kiss between the eyes, on the nose, and then flush on the mouth. Jake laughed and blushed bright red. "That's what matters, and right now that's the only thing in the world that does."

## 6

"First aid can wait," Eddie said. He put his arm around Jake's shoulders and led the boy to the ladder. "Can you use that hand to climb with?"

"Yes. But I can't bring Oy. Roland, will you?"

"Yes." Roland picked Oy up and tucked him into his shirt as he had while descending a shaft under the city in pursuit of Jake and Gasher. Oy peeked out at Jake with his bright, gold-ringed eyes. "Up you go."

Jake climbed. Roland followed close enough so that Oy could sniff the kid's heels

by stretching out his long neck.

"Suze?" Eddie asked. "Need a boost?"

"And get your nasty hands all over my well-turned fanny? Not likely, white boy!" Then she dropped him a wink and began to climb, pulling herself up easily with her muscular arms and balancing with the stumps of her legs. She went fast, but not too fast for Eddie; he reached up and gave her a soft pinch where the pinching was good. "Oh, my purity!" Su-sannah cried, laughing and rolling her eyes. Then she was gone. Only Eddie was left, standing by the foot of the ladder and looking around at the luxury coach which he had believed might well be their *ka-tet's* coffin.

*You did it, kiddo. Henry said. Made him set himself on fire. I knew you could, fuckin-A. Remember when I said that to those scag-bags behind Dahlie's? Jimmie Polio and those guys? And how they laughed? But you did it. Sent him home with a fuckin rupture.*

*Well, it worked, anyway, Eddie thought, and touched the butt of Roland's gun without even being aware of it. Well enough for us to walk away one more time. He climbed two rungs, then looked back down. The Barony Coach al-ready felt dead. Long dead, in fact, just another artifact of a world that had moved on.*

"Adios, Blaine," Eddie said. "So long, partner."

And he followed his friends out through the emergency exit in the roof.

## CHAPTER IV

### topeka

Jake stood on the slightly tilted roof of Blame the Mono, looking south-east along the Path of the Beam. The wind riffled his hair (now quite long and decidedly un-Piperish) back from his temples and forehead in waves. His eyes were wide with surprise.

He didn't know what he had expected to see—a smaller and more provincial version of Lud, perhaps—but what he had *not* expected was what loomed above the trees of a nearby park. It was a green road sign (against the dull gray autumn sky, it almost screamed with color) with a blue shield mounted on it:



Roland joined him, lifted Oy gently out of his shirt, and put him down. The humbler sniffed the pink surface of Blaine's roof, then looked toward the front of the mono. Here the train's smooth bullet shape was broken by crumpled metal which had peeled back in jagged wings. Two dark slashes—they began at the mono's tip and extended to a point about ten yards from where Jake and Roland stood—gored the roof in parallel lines. At the end of each was a wide, flat metal pole painted in stripes of yellow and black. These seemed to jut from the top of the mono at a point just forward of the Barony Coach. To Jake they looked a little like foot-ball goalposts.

"Those are the piers he talked about hitting," Susannah murmured.

Roland nodded.

"We got off lucky, big boy, you know it? If this thing had been going much faster ..."

"*Ka*, " Eddie said from behind them. He sounded as if he might be smiling.

Roland nodded. "Just so. *Ka*."

Jake dismissed the transteel goalposts and turned back toward the sign. He was half convinced it would be gone, or that it would say some-thing else (mid-world toll road, perhaps, or beware of demons), but it was still there and still said the same thing.

"Eddie? Susannah? Do you see that?"

They looked along his pointing finger. For a moment—one long enough for Jake to fear he was having a hallucination—neither of them said anything. Then, softly,



Eddie said: "Holy shit. Are we back home? If we are, where are all the people? And if something like Blaine has been stopping off in Topeka—*our* Topeka, Topeka, Kansas—how come I haven't seen anything about it on *Sixty Minutes*?" "What's *Sixty Minutes*?" Susannah asked. She was shading her eyes, looking southeast toward the sign.

"TV show," Eddie said. "You missed it by five or ten years. Old white guys in ties. Doesn't matter. That sign—"

"It's Kansas, all right," Susannah said. "*Our* Kansas. I guess." She had spotted another sign, just visible over the trees. Now she pointed until Jake, Eddie, and Roland had all seen it:



"There a Kansas in your world, Roland?"

"No," Roland replied, looking at the signs, "we're far beyond the boundaries of the world I knew. I was far beyond most of the world I knew long before I met you three. This place . . ."

He stopped and cocked his head to one side, as if he was listening to some sound almost too distant to hear. And the expression on his face ... Jake didn't like it much.

"Say, kiddies!" Eddie said brightly. "Today we're studying Wacky Geography in Mid-World. You see, boys and girls, in Mid-World you start in New York, travel southeast to Kansas, and then continue along the Path of the Beam until you come to the Dark Tower . . . which happens to be smack in the middle of everything. First, fight the giant lobsters! Next, ride the psychotic train! And then, after a visit to our snackbar for a popkin or two—"

"Do you hear anything?" Roland broke in. "Any of you?"

Jake listened. He heard the wind combing through the trees of the nearby park—their leaves had just begun to turn—and he heard the click of Oy's toenails as he strolled back toward them along the roof of the Barony Coach. Then Oy stopped, so even that sound—

A hand seized him by the arm, making him jump. It was Susannah. Her head was

tilted, her eyes wide. Eddie was also listening. Oy, too; his ears were up and he was whining far down in his throat.

Jake felt his arms ripple with gooseflesh. At the same time he felt his mouth tighten in a grimace. The sound, though very faint, was the auditory version of biting a lemon. And he'd heard something like it before. Back when he was only five or six, there had been a crazy guy in Central Park who thought he was a musician . . . well, there were *lots* of crazy guys in Central Park who thought they were musicians, but this was the only one Jake had ever seen who played a workshop tool. The guy had had a sign beside his upturned hat which read world's greatest SAW-PLAYER! SOUNDS HAWAIIAN DOESN'T IT! PLEASE CONTRIBUTE TO MY WELFARE!

Greta Shaw had been with Jake the first time he encountered the saw-player, and Jake remembered how she had hurried past the guy. Just sitting there like a cellist in a symphony orchestra he'd been, only with a rust-speckled handsaw spread across his open legs; Jake remembered the expression of comic horror on Mrs. Shaw's face, and the quiver of her pressed-together lips, as if—yes, as if she'd just bitten into a lemon.

This sound wasn't *exactly* like the one  
(SOUNDS HAWAIIAN DOESN'T IT)

the guy in the park had made by vibrating the blade of his saw, but it was close: a wavery, trembly, metallic sound that made you feel like your sinuses were filling up and your eyes would shortly begin to gush water. Was it coming from ahead of them? Jake couldn't tell. It seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere; at the same time, it was so low he might have been tempted to believe the whole thing was just his imagination, if the others hadn't—

"Watch out!" Eddie cried. "Help me, you guys! I think he's going to faint!"

Jake wheeled toward the gunslinger and saw that his face had gone as white as cottage cheese above the dusty no-color of his shirt. His eyes were wide and blank. One corner of his mouth twitched spastically, as if an invisible fishhook were buried there.

"Jonas and Reynolds and Depape," he said. "The Big Coffin Hunters. And *her*. The Coos. They were the ones. They were the ones who—"

Standing on the roof of the mono in his dusty, broken boots, Roland tottered. On his face was the greatest look of misery Jake had ever seen.

"Oh Susan," he said. "Oh, my dear."

## 2

They caught him, they formed a protective ring around him, and the gunslinger felt hot with guilt and self-loathing. What had he done to deserve such enthusiastic protectors? What, besides tear them out of their known and ordinary lives as ruthlessly as a man might tear weeds out of his garden?

He tried to tell them he was all right, they could stand back, he was fine, but no words would come out; that terrible wavery sound had transported him back to the box canyon west of Hambry all those years ago. Depape and Reynolds and old limping Jonas. Yet most of all it was the woman from the hill he hated, and from black depths of feeling only a very young man can reach. Ah, but how could he have done aught else but hate them? His heart had been broken. And now, all these years later, it seemed to him that the most horrible fact of human existence was that broken hearts mended.

*My first thought was, he lied in every word/That hoary cripple, with malicious eye*

...

What words? Whose poem?

He didn't know, but he knew that women could lie, too; women who hopped and grinned and saw too much from the comers of their rheumy old eyes. It didn't matter who had written the lines of poesy; the words were true words, and that was all that mattered. Neither Eldred Jonas nor the crone on the hill had been of Marten's stature—nor even of Walter's—when it came to evil, but they had been evil enough.

Then, after... in the box canyon west of town . . . that sound . . . that, and the screams of wounded men and horses . . . for once in his life, even the normally voluble Cuthbert had been struck silent.

But all that had been long ago, in another *when*; in the here and now, the warbling sound was either gone or had temporarily fallen below the threshold of audibility. They would hear it again, though. He knew that as well as he knew the fact that he walked a road leading to damnation.

He looked up at the others and managed a smile. The trembling at the comer of his mouth had quit, and that was something.

"I'm all right," he said. "But hear me well: this is very close to where Mid-World ends, very close to where End-World begins. The first great course of our quest is finished. We have done well; we have remembered the faces of our fathers; we have stood together and been true to one another. But now we have come to a thinny. We must be very careful."

"A thinny?" Jake asked, looking around nervously.

"Places where the fabric of existence is almost entirely worn away. There are more since the force of the Dark Tower began to fail. Do you remember what we saw below us when we left Lud?"

They nodded solemnly, remembering ground which had fused to black glass, ancient pipes which gleamed with turquoise witchlight, mis-shapen bird-freaks with wings like great leathern sails. Roland suddenly could not bear to have them grouped around him as they were, looking down on him as folk might look down on a rowdy who had fallen in a bar-room brawl.

He lifted his hands to his friends—his new friends. Eddie took them and helped him to his feet. The gunslinger fixed his enormous will on not swaying and stood steady.

"Who was Susan?" Susannah asked. The crease down the center of her forehead suggested she was troubled, and probably by more than a co-incidental similarity of names.

Roland looked at her, then at Eddie, then at Jake, who had dropped to one knee so he could scratch behind Oy's ears.

"I'll tell you," he said, "but this isn't the place or time."

"You keep sayin that," Susannah said. "You wouldn't just be putting us off again, would you?"

Roland shook his head. "You shall hear my tale—this part of it, at least—but not on top of this metal carcass."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Being up here is like playing on a dead dinosaur or something. I keep thinking Blaine's going to come back to life and start, I don't know, screwing around with our heads again."

"That sound is gone," Eddie said. "The thing that sounded like a wah-wah pedal."

"It reminded me of this old guy I used to see in Central Park,"

Jake said.

"The man with the saw?" Susannah asked. Jake looked up at her, his eyes round

with surprise, and she nodded. "Only he wasn't old when I used to see him. It's not just the geography that's wacky here. Time's kind of funny, too."

Eddie put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a brief squeeze. "Amen to that."

Susannah turned to Roland. Her look was not accusing, but there was a level and open measurement in her eyes that the gunslinger could not help but admire. "I'm holding you to your promise, Roland. I want to know about this girl that got my name."

"You shall hear," Roland repeated. "For now, though, let's get off this monster's back."

### 3

That was easier said than done. Blaine had come to rest slightly askew in an outdoor version of the Cradle of Lud (a littered trail of torn pink metal lay along one side of this, marking the end of Blaine's last journey), and it was easily twenty-five feet from the roof of the Barony Coach to the cement. If there was a descent-ladder, like the one which had popped conveniently through the emergency hatch, it had jammed when they crunched to a halt.

Roland unslung his purse, rummaged, and removed the deerskin harness they used for carrying Susannah when the going got too rough for her wheelchair. The chair, at least, would not worry them anymore, the gunslinger reflected; they had left it behind in their mad scramble to board Blaine.

"What you want that for?" Susannah asked truculently. She always sounded truculent when the harness came into view. *I hate them honky mahfahs down in Miss'ippi worse'n I hate that harness*, she had once told Eddie in the voice of Delta Walker, *but sometimes it be a close thing, sugar*.

"Soft, Susannah Dean, soft," the gunslinger said, smiling a little. He unbraided the network of straps which made up the harness, set the seat-piece aside, then pigtailed the straps back together. He wedded this to his last good hank of rope with an old-fashioned sheetbend knot. As he worked, he listened for the warbling of the thinny ... as the **four** of them had listened for the god-drums; as he and Eddie had listened for the lobstrosities to begin asking their lawyerly questions ("Dad-a-cham? Did-a-chee? Dum-a-chum?") as they came tumbling out of the

waves each night.

*Ka is a wheel*, he thought. Or, as Eddie liked to say, whatever went around came around.

When the rope was finished, he fashioned a loop at the bottom of the braided section. Jake stepped a foot into it with perfect confidence, gripped the rope with one hand, and settled Oy into the crook of his other arm. Oy looked around nervously, whined, stretched his neck, licked Jake's face.

"You're not afraid, are you?" Jake asked the humbler.

"'Fraid," Oy agreed, but he was quiet enough as Roland and Eddie lowered Jake down the side of the Barony Coach. The rope wasn't quite long enough to take him all the way down, but Jake had no trouble twist-ing his foot free and dropping the last four feet. He set Oy down. The bumbler trotted off, sniffing, and lifted his leg against the side of the ter-minal building. This was nowhere near as grand as the Cradle of Lud, but it had an old-fashioned look that Roland liked—white boards, over-hanging eaves, high, narrow windows, what looked like slate shingles. It was a *Western* look. Written in gold gilt on a sign which stretched above the terminal's line of doors was this message:

ATCHISON, TOPEKA, AND SANTA FE

Towns, Roland supposed, and that last one sounded familiar to him; had there not been a Santa Fe in the Barony of Mejis? But that led back toward Susan, lovely Susan at the window with her hair unbraided and all down her back, the smell of her like jasmine and rose and honeysuckle and old sweet hay, smells of which the oracle in the mountains had been able to make only the palest mimicry. Susan lying back and looking solemnly up at him, then smiling and putting her hands behind her head so that her breasts rose, as if aching for his hands.

*If you love me, Roland, then love me . . . bird and bear and hare and fish...*

". . . next?"

He looked around at Eddie, having to use all of his will to pull himself back from Susan Delgado's when. There were thinnies here in Topeka, all right, and of many sorts. "My mind was wandering, Eddie. Cry your pardon."

"Susannah next? That's what I asked."

Roland shook his head. "You next, then Susannah. I'll go last."

"Will you be okay? With your hand and all?"

"I'll be fine."

Eddie nodded and stuck his foot into the loop. When Eddie had first come into Mid-World, Roland could have lowered him easily by himself, two fingers short the full complement or no, but Eddie had been without his drug for months now, and had put on ten or fifteen pounds of muscle. Roland accepted Susannah's help gladly enough, and together they low-ered him down.

"Now you, lady," Roland said, and smiled at her. It felt more natural to smile these days.

"Yes." But for the nonce she only stood there, biting her lower lip.

"What is it?"

Her hand went to her stomach and rubbed there, as if it ached or griped her. He thought she would speak, but she shook her head and said, "Nothing."

"I don't believe that. Why do you rub your belly? Are you hurt? Were you hurt when we stopped?"

She took her hand off her tunic as if the flesh just south of her navel had grown hot. "No. I'm fine."

"Are you?"

Susannah seemed to think this over very carefully. "We'll talk," she said at last. "We'll *palaver*, if you like that better. But you were right be-fore, Roland—this isn't the place or time."

"All four of us, or just you and me and Eddie?"

"Just you and me, Roland," she said, and poked the stump of her leg through the loop. "Just one hen and one rooster, at least to start with. Now lower away, if you please."

He did, frowning down at her, hoping with all his heart that his first idea—the one that had come to mind as soon as he saw that restlessly rub-bing hand—was wrong. Because she had been in the speaking ring, and the demon that denned there had had its way with her while Jake was try-ing to cross between the worlds. Sometimes—*often*—demonic contact changed things.

Never for the better, in Roland's experience.

He pulled his rope back up after Eddie had caught Susannah around the waist and helped her to the platform. The gunslinger walked forward to one of the piers which had torn through the train's bullet snout, fash-ioning the rope's end into a shake-loop as he went. He tossed this over the pier, snubbed it (being careful not to twitch the rope to the left), and then lowered himself to the platform himself,

bent at the waist and leaving boot-tracks on Blaine's pink side.

"Too bad to lose the rope and harness," Eddie remarked when Roland was beside them.

"I ain't sorry about that harness," Susannah said. "I'd rather crawl along the pavement until I got chewin-gum all the way up my arms to the elbows."

"We haven't lost anything," Roland said. He snugged his hand into the rawhide foot-loop and snapped it hard to the left. The rope slithered down from the pier, Roland gathering it in almost as fast as it came down.

"Neat trick!" Jake said.

"Eat! Rick!" Oy agreed.

"Cort?" Eddie asked.

"Cort," Roland agreed, smiling.

"The drill instructor from hell," Eddie said. "Better you than me, Roland. Better you than me."

#### 4

As they walked toward the doors leading into the station, that low, liquid warbling sound began again. Roland was amused to see all three of his cohorts wrinkle their noses and pull down the comers of their mouths at the same time; it made them look like blood family as well as *ka-tet*. Su-sannah pointed toward the park. The signs looming over the "trees were wavering slightly, the way things did in a heat-haze.

"Is that from the thinny?" Jake asked.

Roland nodded.

"Will we be able to get around it?"

"Yes. Thinnies are dangerous in much the way that swamps full of quicksand and saligs are dangerous. **Do** you know those things?"

"We know quicksand," Jake said. "And if saligs are long green things with big teeth, we know them, too."

"That's what they are."

Susannah turned to look back at Blaine one last time. "No silly ques-tions and no silly games. The book was right about that." From Blaine she turned her eyes to Roland. "What about Beryl Evans, the woman who wrote *Charlie the Choo-Choo*?"



Do you think she's part of this? That we might even meet her? I'd like to thank her. Eddie figured it out, but—"

"It's possible, I suppose," Roland said, "but on measure, I think not. My world is like a huge ship that sank near enough shore for most of the wreckage to wash up on the beach. Much of what we find is fascinating, some of it may be useful, *if ka* allows, but all of it is still wreckage. Sense-less wreckage." He looked around.

"Like this place, I think."

"I wouldn't exactly call it wrecked," Eddie said. "Look at the paint on the station—it's a little rusty from the gutters up under the eaves, but it hasn't peeled anywhere that I can see." He stood in front of the doors and ran his fingers down one of the glass panels. They left four clear tracks behind. "Dust and plenty of it, but no cracks. I'd say that this building has been left unmaintained at most since . . . the start of the summer, maybe?"

He looked at Roland, who shrugged and nodded. He was listening with only half an ear and paying attention with only half a mind. The rest of him was fixed upon two things: the warble of the thinny, and keeping away the memories that wanted to swamp him.

"But Lud had been going to wrack and ruin for *centuries*" Susannah said. "This place . . . it may or may not be Topeka, but what it really looks like to me is one of those creepy little towns on *The Twilight Zone*. You boys probably don't remember that one, but—"

"Yes, I do," Eddie and Jake said in perfect unison, then looked at each other and laughed. Eddie stuck out his hand and Jake slapped it.

"They still show the reruns," Jake said.

"Yeah, all the time," Eddie added. "Usually sponsored by bankruptcy lawyers who look like shorthair terriers. And you're right. This place *isn't* like Lud. Why would it be? It's not in the same *world* as Lud. I don't know where we crossed over, but—" He pointed again at the blue Inter-state 70 shield, as if that proved his case beyond a shadow of a doubt.

"If it's Topeka, where are the people?" Susannah asked.

Eddie shrugged and raised his hands—who knows?

Jake put his forehead against the glass of the center door, cupped his hands to the sides of his face, and peered in. He looked for several seconds, then saw something that made him pull back fast. "Oh-oh," he said. "No wonder the town's

so quiet."

Roland stepped up behind Jake and peered in over the boy's head, cupping his own hands to reduce his reflection. The gunslinger drew two conclusions before even looking at what Jake had seen. The first was that although this was most assuredly a *train* station, it wasn't really a *Blame* station . . . not a cradle. The other was that the station did indeed belong to Eddie's, Jake's, and Susannah's world . . . but perhaps not to their *where*.

*It's the thinny. We'll have to be careful.*

Two corpses were leaning together on one of the long benches that filled most of the room; but for their hanging, wrinkled faces and black hands, they might have been revellers who had fallen asleep in the station after an arduous party and missed the last train home. On the wall behind them was a board marked departures, with the names of cities and towns and baronies marching down it in a line. denver, read one. wichita, read another. omaha, read a third. Roland had once known a one-eyed gambler named Omaha; he had died with a knife in his throat at a Watch Me table. He had stepped into the clearing at the end of the path with his head thrown back, and his last breath had sprayed blood all the way up to the ceiling. Hanging down from the ceiling of this room (which Roland's stupid and laggard mind insisted on thinking of as a stage rest, as if this were a stop along some half-forgotten road like the one that had brought him to Tull) was a beautiful four-sided clock. Its hands had stopped at 4:14, and Roland supposed they would never move again. It was a sad thought. . . but this was a sad world. He could not see any other dead people, but experience suggested that where there were two dead, there were likely four more dead somewhere out of sight. Or four dozen.

"Should we go in?" Eddie asked.

"Why?" the gunslinger countered. "We have no business here; it doesn't lie along the Path of the Beam."

"You'd make a great tour-guide," Eddie said sourly. "'Keep up, everyone, and please don't go wandering off into the—' "

Jake interrupted with a request Roland didn't understand. "Do either of you guys have a quarter?" The boy was looking at Eddie and Susannah. Beside him was a square metal box. Written on it in blue was:

*The Topeka Capital-Journal covers Kansas like no other! Your hometown paper!  
Read it every day!*

Eddie shook his head, amused. "Lost all my change at some point. Probably climbing a tree, just before you joined us, in an all-out effort to avoid becoming snack-food for a robot bear. Sorry."

"Wait a minute . . . wait a minute . . ." Susannah had her purse open and was rummaging through it in a way that made Roland grin broadly in spite of all his preoccupations. It was so damned *womanly*, somehow. She turned over crumpled Kleenex, shook them to make sure there was nothing caught inside, fished out a compact, looked at it, dropped it back, came up with a comb, dropped *that* back— She was too absorbed to look up as Roland strode past her, drawing his gun from the docker's clutch he had built her as he went. He fired a single time. Susannah let out a little scream, dropping her purse and slapping at the empty holster high up under her left breast.

"Honky, you scared the *livin Jesus* out of me!"

"Take better care of your gun, Susannah, or the next time someone takes it from you, the hole may be between your eyes instead of in a . . . what is it, Jake? A news-telling device of some kind? Or does it hold paper?"

"Both." Jake looked startled. Oy had withdrawn halfway down the platform and was looking at Roland mistrustfully. Jake poked his finger at the bullet-hole in the center of the newspaper box's locking device. A little curl of smoke was drifting from it.

"Go on," Roland said. "Open it."

Jake pulled the handle. It resisted for a moment, then a piece of metal clunked down somewhere inside, and the door opened. The box itself was empty; the sign on the back wall read when all papers are gone, please take display copy. Jake worked it out of its wire holder, and they all gathered round.

"What in God's name . . . ?" Susannah's whisper was both horrified and accusing.

"What does it mean? What in God's name *happened*?"

Below the newspaper's name, taking up most of the front page's top half, were screaming black letters:

**"CAPTAIN TRIPS" SUPERFLU RAGES UNCHECKED**

*Govt. Leaders May Have Fled Country*

*Topeka Hospitals Jammed with Sick, Dying*

*Millions Pray for Cure*

"Read it aloud," Roland said. "The letters are in your speech, I cannot make them all out, and I would know this story very well."

Jake looked at Eddie, who nodded impatiently.

Jake unfolded the newspaper, revealing a dot-picture (Roland had seen pictures of this type; they were called "fottergrafs") which shocked them all: it showed a lakeside city with its skyline in flames. cleveland fires burn unchecked, the caption beneath read.

"Read, kid!" Eddie told him. Susannah said nothing; she was already reading the story—the only one on the front page—over his shoulder. Jake cleared his throat as if it were suddenly dry, and began.

## 5

"The byline says John Corcoran, plus staff and AP reports. That means a lot of different people worked on it, Roland. Okay. Here goes. 'America's greatest crisis—and the world's, perhaps—deepened overnight as the so-called superflu, known as Tube-Neck in the Midwest and Captain Trips in California, continues to spread.

" 'Although the death-toll can only be estimated, medical experts say the total at this point is horrible beyond comprehension: twenty to thirty million dead in the continental U.S. alone is the estimate given by Dr. Morris Hackford of Topeka's St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center. Bodies are being burned from Los Angeles, California, to Boston, Massa-chusetts, in crematoria, factory furnaces, and at landfill sites.

" 'Here in Topeka, the bereaved who are still well enough and strong enough to do so are urged to take their dead to one of three sites: the dis-posal plant north of Oakland Billard Park; the pit area at Heartland Park Race Track; the landfill on Southeast Sixty-first Street, east of Forbes Field. Landfill users should approach by Berryton Road; California has been blocked by car wrecks and at least one downed Air Force transport plane, sources tell us.' "

Jake glanced up at his friends with frightened eyes, looked behind him at the silent railway station, then looked back down at the newspaper.

" 'Dr. April Montoya of the Stormont-Vail Regional Medical Center points out

that the death-toll, horrifying as it is, constitutes only part of this terrible story. "For every person who has died so far as a result of this new flu-strain," Montoya said, "there are another six who are lying ill in their homes, perhaps as many as a dozen. And, so far as we have been able to determine, the recovery rate is zero." Coughing, she then told this reporter: "Speaking personally, I'm not making any plans for the weekend."

" 'In other local developments:

" 'All commercial flights out of Forbes and Phillip Billard have been cancelled.

" 'All Amtrak rail travel has been suspended, not just in Topeka but across all of Kansas. The Gage Boulevard Amtrak station has been closed until further notice.

" 'All Topeka schools have also been closed until further notice. This includes Districts 437, 345, 450 (Shawnee Heights), 372, and 501 (metro Topeka). Topeka Lutheran and Topeka Technical College are also closed, as is KU at Lawrence.

" 'Topekans must expect brownouts and perhaps blackouts in the days and weeks ahead. Kansas Power and Light has announced a "slow shutdown" of the Kaw River Nuclear Plant in Wamego. Although no one in KawNuke's Office of Public Relations answered this newspaper's calls, a recorded announcement cautions that there is no plant emergency, that this is a safety measure only. KawNuke will return to on-line status, the announcement concludes, "when the current crisis is past." Any comfort afforded by this statement is in large part negated by the recorded statement's final words, which are not "Goodbye" or "Thank you for calling" but "God will help us through our time of trial." ' "

Jake paused, following the story to the next page, where there were more pictures: a burned-out panel truck overturned on the steps of the Kansas Museum of Natural History; traffic on San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge stalled bumper to bumper; piles of corpses in Times Square. One body, Susannah saw, had been hung from a lamppost, and that brought back nightmarish memories of the run for the Cradle of Lud she and Eddie had made after parting from the gunslinger; memories of Luster and Winston and Jeeves and Maud. *When the god-drums started up this time, it was Spanker's stone what came out of the hat*, Maud had said. *We set him to dance*. Except, of course, what she'd meant was that they had set him to *hang*. As they had hung some folks, it seemed, back home in little old New York. When things got weird enough, someone always found a lynchrope, it seemed. Echoes. Everything echoed now. They bounced back and forth from one world to

the other, not fading as ordinary echoes did but growing and becoming more terrible. *Like the god-drums*, Susannah thought, and shuddered.

" 'In national developments,' " Jake read, " 'conviction continues to grow that, after denying the superflu's existence during its early days, when quarantine measures might still have had some effect, national leaders have fled to underground retreats which were created as brain-trust shelters in case of nuclear war. Vice-President Bush and key members of the Reagan cabinet have not been seen during the last forty-eight hours. Reagan himself has not been seen since Sunday morning, when he attended prayer services at Green Valley Methodist Church in San Simeon.

" ' "They have gone to the bunkers like Hitler and the rest of the Nazi sewer-rats at the end of World War II," said Rep. Steve Sloan. When asked if he had any objection to being quoted by name, Kansas's first-term representative, a Republican, laughed and said: "Why should I? I've got a real fine case myself. I'll be so much dust in the wind come this time next week."

" 'Fires, most likely set, continue to ravage Cleveland, Indianapolis, and Terre Haute.

" 'A gigantic explosion centered near Cincinnati's Riverfront Stadium was apparently not nuclear in nature, as was first feared, but occurred as the result of a natural gas buildup caused by unsupervised . . . ' "

Jake let the paper drop from his hands. A gust of wind caught it and blew it the length of the platform, the few folded sheets separating as they went. Oy stretched his neck and snagged one of these as it went by. He trotted toward Jake with it in his mouth, as obedient as a dog with a stick.

"No, Oy, I don't want it," Jake said. He sounded ill and very young.

"At least we know where all the folks are," Susannah said, bending and taking the paper from Oy. It was the last two pages. They were crammed with obituaries printed in the tiniest type she had ever seen. No pictures, no causes of death, no announcement of burial services. Just this one died, beloved of so-and-so, that one died, beloved of Jill-n-Joe, t'other one died, beloved of them-and-those. All in that tiny, not-quite-even type. It was the jaggedness of the type which convinced her it was all real.

*But how hard they tried to honor their dead, even at the end*, she thought, and a lump rose in her throat. *How hard they tried.*

She folded the quarto together and looked on the back—the last page of the *Capital-Journal*. It showed a picture of Jesus Christ, eyes sad, hands outstretched, forehead marked from his crown of thorns. Below it, three stark words in huge type:

## PRAY FOR US

She looked up at Eddie, eyes accusing. Then she handed him the newspaper, one brown finger tapping the date at the top. It was June 24, 1986. Eddie had been drawn into the gunslinger's world a year later.

He held it for a long time, fingers slipping back and forth across the date, as if the passage of his finger would somehow cause it to change. Then he looked up at them and shook his head. "No. I can't explain this town, this paper, or the dead people in that station, but I can set you straight about one thing—everything was fine in New York when I left. Wasn't it, Roland?"

The gunslinger looked a trifle sour. "Nothing in your city seemed very fine to me, but the people who lived there did not seem to be survivors of such a plague as this, no."

"There was something called Legionnaires' disease," Eddie said. "And AIDS, of course—"

"That's the sex one, right?" Susannah asked. "Transmitted by fruits and drug addicts?"

"Yes, but calling gays fruits isn't the done thing in my when," Eddie said. He tried a smile, but it felt stiff and unnatural on his face and he put it away again.

"So this . . . this never happened," Jake said, tentatively touching the face of Christ on the back page of the paper.

"But it did," Roland said. "It happened in June-sowing of the year one thousand nine hundred and eighty-six. And here we are, in the aftermath of that plague. If Eddie's right about the length of time that has gone by, the plague of this 'superflu' was *this past* June-sowing. We're in Topeka, Kansas, in the Reap of eighty-six. That's the *when* of it. As to the *where*, all we know is that it's not Eddie's. It might be yours, Susannah, or yours, Jake, because you left your world before this arrived." He tapped the date on the paper, then looked at Jake. "You said something to me once. I doubt if you remember, but I do; it's one of the most

important things anyone has ever said to me: 'Go, then, there are other worlds than these.' "

"More riddles," Eddie said, scowling.

"Is it not a fact that Jake Chambers died once and now stands before us, alive and well? Or do you doubt my story of his death under the mountains? That you have doubted my honesty from time to time is something I know. And I suppose you have your reasons."

Eddie thought it over, then shook his head. "You lie when it suits your purpose, but I think that when you told us about Jake, you were too fucked up to manage anything but the truth."

Roland was startled to find himself hurt by what Eddie had said—*You lie when it suits your purpose*—but he went on. After all, it was essentially true.

"We went back to time's pool," the gunslinger said, "and pulled him out before he could drown."

"*You* pulled him out," Eddie corrected.

"You helped, though," Roland said, "if only by keeping me alive, you helped, but let that go for now. It's beside the point. What's more to it is that there are many possible worlds, and an infinity of doors leading into them. This is one of those worlds; the thinny we can hear is one of those doors . . . only one much bigger than the ones we found on the beach."

"*How big?*" Eddie asked. "As big as a warehouse loading door, or as big as the warehouse?"

Roland shook his head and raised his hands palms to the sky—*who knows?*

"This thinny," Susannah said. "We're not just *near* it, are we? We came *through* it. That's how we got here, to this version of Topeka."

"We may have," Roland admitted. "Did any of you feel something strange? A sensation of vertigo, or transient nausea?"

They shook their heads. Oy, who had been watching Jake closely, also shook his head this time.

"No," Roland said, as if he had expected this. "But we were concentrating on the riddling—"

"Concentrating on not getting killed," Eddie grunted.

"Yes. So perhaps we passed through without being aware. In any case, thinnies aren't natural—they are sores on the skin of existence, able to exist because things



are going wrong. Things in *all* worlds."

"Because things are wrong at the Dark Tower," Eddie said.

Roland nodded. "And even if this place—this *when*, this *where*—is not the *ka* of your world now, it might become that *ka*. This plague—or others even worse—could spread. Just as the thinnies will continue to spread, growing in size and number. I've seen perhaps half a dozen in my years of searching for the Tower, and heard maybe two dozen more. The first ... the first one I ever saw was when I was still very young. Near a town called Hambry." He rubbed his hand up his cheek again, and was not surprised to find sweat amid the bristles. *Love me, Roland. If you love me, then love me.*

"Whatever happened to us, it bumped us out of your world, Roland," Jake said.

"We've fallen off the Beam. Look." He pointed at the sky. The clouds were moving slowly above them, but no longer in the direction Blame's smashed snout was pointing. Southeast was still southeast, but the signs of the Beam which they had grown so used to following were gone.

"Does it matter?" Eddie asked. "I mean ... the *Beam* may be gone, but the *Tower* exists in all worlds, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Roland said, "but it may not be *accessible* from all worlds."

The year before beginning his wonderful and fulfilling career as a heroin addict, Eddie had done a brief and not-very-successful turn as a bi-cycle messenger. Now he remembered certain office-building elevators he'd been in while making deliveries, buildings with banks or investment firms in them, mostly. There were some floors where you couldn't stop the car and get off unless you had a special card to swipe through the slot below the numbers. When the elevator came to those locked-off floors, the number in the window was replaced by an X.

"I think," Roland said, "we need to find the Beam again."

"I'm convinced," Eddie said. "Come on, let's get going." He took a couple of steps, then turned back to Roland with one eyebrow raised. "Where?"

"The way we were going," Roland said, as if that should have been obvious, and walked past Eddie in his dusty, broken boots, headed for the park across the way.

# CHAPTER V

## TURMPIKIN'

1

Roland walked to the end of the platform, kicking bits of pink metal out of his way as he went. At the stairs, he paused and looked back at them somberly. "Mare dead. Be ready."

"They're not. . . um ... runny, are they?" Jake asked.

Roland frowned, then his face cleared as he understood what Jake meant. "No. Not runny. Dry."

"That's all right, then," Jake said, but he held his hand out to Susan-nah, who was being carried by Eddie for the time being. She gave him a smile and folded her fingers around his.

At the foot of the stairs leading down to the commuter parking lot at the side of the station, half a dozen corpses lay together like a collapsed cornshock. Two were women, three were men. The sixth was a child in a stroller. A summer spent dead in the sun and rain and heat (not to mention at the mercy of any stray cats, coons, or woodchucks that might be pass-ing) had given the toddler a look of ancient wisdom and mystery, like a child mummy discovered in an Incan pyramid. Jake supposed from the faded blue outfit it was wearing that it had been a boy, but it was impossi-ble to tell for sure. Eyeless, lipless, its skin faded to dusky gray, it made a joke of gender—why did the dead baby cross the road? Because it was stapled to the superflu.

Even so, the toddler seemed to have voyaged through Topeka's empty post-plague months better than the adults around it. They were lit-tle more than skeletons with hair. In a scrawny bunch of skin-wrapped bones that had once been fingers, one of the men clutched the handle of a suitcase that looked like the Samsonites Jake's parents owned. As with the baby (as with *all* of them), his eyes were gone; huge

dark sockets stared at Jake. Below them, a ring of discolored teeth jutted in a pugnacious grin. *What took you so long, kid?* the dead man who was still clutching his suitcase seemed to be asking. *Been waiting for you, and it's been a long hot summer!*

*Where were you guys hoping to go?* Jake wondered. *Just where in the crispy crap did you think might be safe enough? Des Moines? Sioux City? Fargo? The moon?*

They went down the stairs, Roland first, the others behind him, Jake still holding Susannah's hand with Oy at his heels. The long-bodied bumbler seemed to descend each step in two stages, like a double trailer taking speed-bumps.

"Slow down, Roland," Eddie said. "I want to check the cripp spaces before we go on. We might get lucky."

"Cripp spaces?" Susannah said. "What're those?"

Jake shrugged. He didn't know. Neither did Roland.

Susannah switched her attention to Eddie. "I only ask, sugarpie, be-cause it sounds a little on-pleasant. You know, like calling Negroes 'blacks' or gay folks 'fruits.' I know I'm just a poor ignorant pickaninny from the dark ages of 1964, but—"

"There." Eddie pointed at a rank of signs marking the parking-row closest to the station. There were actually two signs to a post, the top of each pair blue and white, the bottom red and white. When they drew a little closer, Jake saw the one on top was a wheelchair symbol. The one on the bottom was a warning: \$200 fine for improper use of handicapped **PARKING SPACE. STRICTLY ENFORCED BY TOPEKA P.D.**

"See there!" Susannah said triumphantly. "They shoulda done that a long time ago! Why, back in my when, you're lucky if you can get your damn wheelchair through the doors of anything smaller than the Shop 'n Save. Hell, lucky if you can get it up over the curbs! And special parking? Forget it, sugar!"

The lot was jammed almost to capacity, but even with the end of the world at hand, only two cars that didn't have little wheelchair symbols on their license plates were parked in the row Eddie had called "the cripp spaces."

Jake guessed that respecting the "cripp spaces" was just one of those things that got a mysterious lifelong hold on people, like putting zip-codes on letters, parting your hair, or brushing your teeth before breakfast.

"And there it is!" Eddie cried. "Hold your cards, folks, but I think we have a Bingo!"

Still carrying Susannah on his hip—a thing he would **have** been inca-pable of doing for any extended period of time even a month ago—Eddie hurried over to a boat of a Lincoln. Strapped on the roof was a complicated-looking racing bicycle; poking out of the half-open trunk was a wheelchair. Nor was this the only one; scanning the row of "crip spaces," Jake saw at least four more wheelchairs, most strapped to roof-racks, some stuffed into the backs of vans or station wagons, one (it looked ancient and fearsomely bulky) thrown into the bed of a pickup truck. Eddie set Susannah down and bent to examine the rig holding the chair in the trunk. There were a lot of crisscrossing elastic cords, plus some sort of locking bar. Eddie drew the Ruger Jake had taken from his father's desk drawer. "Fire in the hole," he said cheerfully, and before any of them could even think of covering their ears, he pulled the trigger and blew the lock off the security-bar. The sound went rolling into the silence, then echoed back. The warbling sound of the thinnny returned with it, as if the gunshot had snapped it awake. *Sounds Hawaiian, doesn't it?* Jake thought, and grimaced with distaste. Half an hour ago, he wouldn't have believed that a sound could be as physically upsetting, as ... well, the smell of rotting meat, say, but he believed it now. He looked up at the turnpike signs. From this angle he could see only their tops, but that was enough to confirm that they were shimmering again. *It throws some kind of field,* Jake thought. *The way mixers and vacuum cleaners make static on the radio or TV, or the way that cyclotron gadget made the hair on my arms stand up when Mr. Kingery brought it to class and then asked for volunteers to come up and stand next to it.*

Eddie wrenched the locking bar aside, and used Roland's knife to cut the elastic cords. Then he drew the wheelchair out of the trunk, examined it, unfolded it, and engaged the support which ran across the back at seat-level. "*Voila!*" he said. Susannah had propped herself on one hand—Jake thought she looked a little like the woman in this Andrew Wyeth painting he liked, *Chris-tina 's World*—and was examining the chair with some wonder.

"God almighty, it looks so little 'n light!"

"Modem technology at its finest, darlin," Eddie said. "It's what we fought Vietnam for. Hop in." He bent to help her. She didn't resist him, but her face was set and frowning as he lowered her into the seat. Like she expected the chair to collapse under her, Jake thought. As she ran her hands over the arms of her new ride, her face gradually relaxed.

Jake wandered off a little, walking down another row of cars, running his fingers over their hoods, leaving trails of dust. Oy padded after him, pausing once to lift his leg and squirt a tire, as if he had been doing it all his life.

"Make you homesick, honey?" Susannah asked from behind Jake. "Probably thought you'd never see an honest-to-God American auto-mobile again, am I right?"

Jake considered this and decided she was *not* right. It had never crossed his mind that he would remain in Roland's world forever; that he might never see another car. He didn't think that would bother him, actually, but he also didn't think it was in the cards. Not yet, anyway. There was a certain vacant lot in the New York when he had come from. It was on the corner of Second Avenue and Forty-sixth Street. Once there had been a deli there—Tom and Gerry's, Party Platters Our Specialty—but now it was just rubble, and weeds, and broken glass, and ...

... and a rose. Just a single wild rose growing in a vacant lot where a bunch of condos were scheduled to go up at some point, but Jake had an idea that there was nothing quite like it growing anywhere else on Earth. Maybe not on any of those other worlds Roland had mentioned, either. There were roses as one approached the Dark Tower; roses by the billion, according to Eddie, great bloody acres of them. He had seen them in a dream. Still, Jake suspected that his rose was different even from those . . . and that until its fate was decided, one way or the other, he was not done with the world of cars and TVs and policemen who wanted to know if you had any identification and what your parents' names were.

*And speaking of parents, I may not be done with them, either,* Jake thought. The idea hurried his heartbeat with a mixture of hope and alarm.

They stopped halfway down the row of cars, Jake staring blankly across a wide street (Gage Boulevard, he assumed) as he considered these things. Now Roland and Eddie caught up to them.

"This baby's gonna be great after a couple of months pushing the Iron Maiden," Eddie said with a grin. "Bet you could damn near *puff* it along." He blew a deep breath at the back of the wheelchair to demonstrate. Jake thought of telling Eddie that there were probably others back there in the "crip spaces" with motors in them, then realized what Eddie must have known right away: their batteries would be dead.

Susannah ignored him for the time being; it was Jake she was interested in. "You

didn't answer me, sug. All these cars get you homesick?"

"Nah. But I was curious about whether or not they were all cars I knew. I thought maybe . . . if this version of 1986 grew out of some other world than my 1977, there'd be a way to tell. But I *can't* tell. Because things change so dam fast. Even in nine years . . ." He shrugged, then looked at Eddie. "*You* might be able to, though. I mean, you actually *lived* in 1986."

Eddie grunted. "I lived through it, but I didn't exactly *observe* it. I was fucked to the sky most of the time. Still... I suppose . . ."

Eddie started pushing Susannah along the smooth macadam of the parking lot again, pointing to cars as they passed them. "Ford Explorers ... Chevrolet Caprices . . . and that one there's an old Pontiac, you can tell be-cause of the split grille—" "Pontiac Bonneville," Jake said. He was amused and a little touched by the wonder in Susannah's eyes—most of these cars must look as futur-istic to her as Buck Rogers scout-ships. That made him wonder how Roland felt about them, and Jake looked around.

The gunslinger showed no interest in the cars at all. He was gazing across the street, into the park, toward the turnpike . . . except Jake didn't think he was actually looking at any of those things. Jake had an idea that Roland was simply looking into his own thoughts. If so, the expression on his face suggested that he wasn't finding anything good there.

"That's one of those little Chrysler K's," Eddie said, pointing, "and that's a Subaru. Mercedes SEL 450, excellent, the car of champions . . . Mustang . . . Chrysler Imperial, good shape but must be older'n God—"

"Watch it, boy," Susannah said, with a touch of what Jake thought was real asperity in her voice. "I recognize that one. Looks new to me."

"Sorry, Suze. Really. This one's a Cougar . . . another Chevy . . . and one more ... Topeka loves General Motors, big fuckin surprise there . . . Honda Civic . . . VW Rabbit... a Dodge ... a Ford . . . a—"

Eddie stopped, looking at a little car near the end of the row, white with red trim. "A Takuro," he said, mostly to himself. He went around to look at the trunk. "A Takuro *Spirit*, to be exact. Ever hear of that make and model, Jake of New York?" Jake shook his head.

"Me, neither," he said. "Me fucking neither."

Eddie began pushing Susannah toward Gage Boulevard (Roland with them but

still mostly off in his own private world, walking when they walked, stopping where they stopped). Just shy of the lot's automated entrance (stop TAKE TICKET), Eddie halted.

"At this rate, we'll be old before we get to yonder park and dead before we raise the turnpike," Susannah said.

This time Eddie didn't apologize, didn't seem even to hear her. He was looking at the bumper sticker on the front of a rusty old AMC Pacer. The sticker was blue and white, like the little wheelchair signs marking the "crip spaces." Jake squatted for a better look, and when Oy dropped his head on Jake's knee, the boy stroked him absently. With his other hand he reached out and touched the sticker, as if to verify its reality. *kansas city monarchs*, it said. The 0 in Monarchs was a baseball with speedlines drawn out behind it, as if it were leaving the park.

Eddie said: "Check me if I'm wrong on this, sport, because I know almost zilch about baseball west of Yankee Stadium, but shouldn't that say *Kansas City Royals*? You know, George Brett and all that?"

Jake nodded. He knew the Royals, and he knew Brett, although he had been a young player in Jake's when and must have been a fairly old one in Eddie's.

"*Kansas City Athletics*, you mean," Susannah said, sounding bewildered. Roland ignored it all; he was still cruising in his own personal ozone layer.

"Not by '86, darlin'," Eddie said kindly. "By '86 the Athletics were in Oakland." He glanced from the bumper sticker to Jake. "Minor-league team, maybe?" he asked. "Triple A?"

"The Triple A Royals are still the Royals," Jake said. "They play in Omaha. Come on, let's go."

And although he didn't know about the others, Jake himself went on with a lighter heart. Maybe it was stupid, but he was relieved. He didn't believe that this terrible plague was waiting up ahead for his world, because there were no *Kansas City Monarchs* in his world. Maybe that wasn't enough information upon which to base a conclusion, but it felt true. And it was an enormous relief to be able to believe that his mother and father weren't slated to die of a germ people called Captain Trips and be burned in a ... a landfill, or something.

Except that wasn't quite a sure thing, even if this wasn't the 1986 version of his 1977 world. Because even if this awful plague had happened in a world where there were cars called *Takuro Spirits* and George Brett played for the K.C.

Monarchs, Roland said the trouble was spreading . . . that things like the superflu were eating through the fabric of existence like battery acid eating its way into a piece of cloth.

The gunslinger had spoken of time's pool, a phrase which had at first struck Jake as romantic and charming. But suppose the pool was growing stagnant and swampy? And suppose these Bermuda Triangle-type things Roland called thinnies, once great rarities, were becoming the rule rather than the exception? Suppose—oh, and here was a hideous thought, one guaranteed to keep you lying awake until way past three—all of reality was sagging as the structural weaknesses of the Dark Tower grew? Suppose there came a crash, one level falling down into the next... and the next... and the next... until—

When Eddie grasped his shoulder and squeezed, Jake had to bite his tongue to keep from screaming.

"You're giving yourself the hoodoos," Eddie said.

"What do you know about it?" Jake asked. That sounded rude, but he was mad. From being scared or being seen into? He didn't know. Didn't much care, either.

"When it comes to the hoodoos, I'm an old hand," Eddie said. "I don't know exactly what's on your mind, but whatever it is, this would be an *excellent* time to stop thinking about it."

That, Jake decided, was probably good advice. They walked across the street together. Toward Gage Park and one of the greatest shocks of Jake's life.

## 2

Passing under the wrought-iron arch with gage park written on it in old-fashioned, curlicued letters, they found themselves on a brick path leading through a garden that was half English Formal and half Ecuadorian Jungle. With no one to tend it through the hot Midwestern summer, it had run to riot; with no one to tend it this fall, it had run to seed. A sign just inside the arch proclaimed this to be the Reinisch Rose Garden, and there were roses, all right; roses everywhere. Most had gone over, but some of the wild ones still thrived, making Jake think of the rose in the vacant lot at Forty-sixth and Second with a longing so deep it was an ache. Off to one side as they entered the park was a beautiful old-time carousel, its prancing steeds and racing stallions now still on their posts. The carousel's very



silence, its flashing lights and steamy calliope music stilled forever, gave Jake a chill. Hung over the neck of one horse, dan-gling from a rawhide strip, was some kid's baseball glove. Jake was barely able to look at it.

Beyond the carousel, the foliage grew even thicker, strangling the path until the travellers edged along single-file, like lost children in a fairy-tale wood. Thorns from overgrown and unpruned rosebushes tore at Jake's clothes. He had somehow gotten into the lead (probably because Roland was still deep inside his own thoughts), and that was why he saw Charlie the Choo-Choo first.

His only thought while approaching the narrow-gauge train-tracks which crossed the path—they were little more than toy tracks, really— was of the gunslinger saying that *ka* was like a wheel, always rolling around to the same place again. *We're haunted by roses and trains*, he thought. *Why? I don't know. I guess it's just another rid—*

Then he looked to his left, and "OhgoodnesstoChrist" fell out of his mouth, all in one word. The strength ran out of his legs and he sat down. His voice sounded watery and distant to his own ears. He didn't quite faint, but the color drained out of the world until the running-to-riot fo-lyage on the west side of the park looked almost as gray as the autumn sky overhead.

"Jake! Jake, what's wrong!" It was Eddie, and Jake could hear the genuine concern in his voice, but it seemed to be coming over a bad long-distance connection.

From Beirut, say, or maybe Uranus. And he could feel Roland's steadying hand on his shoulder, but it was as distant as Ed-die's voice.

"Jake!" Susannah. "What's wrong, honey? What—"

Then she saw, and stopped talking at him. Eddie saw, and also stopped talking at him. Roland's hand fell away. They all stood looking ... except for Jake, who *sat* looking. He supposed that strength and feeling would come back into his legs eventually and he would get up, but right now they felt like limp macaroni.

The train was parked fifty feet up, by a toy station that mimicked the one across the street. Hanging from its eaves was a sign which read *topeka*. The train was Charlie the Choo-Choo, cowcatcher and all; a 402 Big Boy Steam Locomotive. And, Jake knew, if he found enough strength to get up on his feet and go over there, he would find a family of mice nested in the seat where the engineer (whose name had undoubtedly been Bob Something-or-other) had once sat. There would be another family, this one of swallows, nested in the smokestack.

*And the dark, oily tears,* Jake thought, looking at the tiny train wait-ing in front of its tiny station with his skin crawling all over his body and his balls hard and his stomach in a knot. *At night it cries those dark, oily tears, and they're rusting the hell out of his fine Stratham headlight. But in your time, Charlie-boy, you pulled your share of kids, right? Around and around Gage Park you went, and the kids laughed, except some of them weren't really laughing; some of them, the ones who were wise to you, were screaming. The way I'd scream now, if I had the strength.* But his strength was coming back, and when Eddie put a hand under one of his arms and Roland put one under the other, Jake was able to get up. He staggered once, then stood steady.

"Just for the record, I don't blame you," Eddie said. His voice was grim; so was his face. "I feel a little like falling over myself. That's the one in your book; that's it to the life."

"So now we know where Miss Beryl Evans got the idea for *Charlie the Choo-Choo*" Susannah said. "Either she lived here, or sometime be-fore 1942, when the damned thing was published, she visited Topeka—"

"—and saw the kids' train that goes through Reinisch Rose Garden and around Gage Park," Jake said. He was getting over his scare now, and he—not just an only child but for most of his life a lonely child—felt a burst of love and gratitude for his friends. They had seen what he had seen, they had understood the source of his fright. Of course—they were *ka-tet*.

"It won't answer silly questions, it won't play silly games," Roland said musingly.

"Can you go on, Jake?"

"Yes."

"You sure?" Eddie asked, and when Jake nodded, Eddie pushed Su-sannah across the tracks. Roland went next. Jake paused a moment, re-mem-bering a dream he'd had—he and Oy had been at a train-crossing, and the bumbler had suddenly leaped onto the tracks, barking wildly at the oncoming headlight.

Now Jake bent and scooped Oy up. He looked at the rusting train standing silently in its station, its dark headlamp like a dead eye. "I'm not afraid," he said in a low voice. "Not afraid of you."

The headlamp came to life and flashed at him once, brief but glare-bright, emphatic: *I know different; I know different, my dear little squint.*

Then it went out.

None of the others had seen. Jake glanced once more at the train, expecting the light to flash again—maybe expecting the cursed thing to actually start up and make a run at him—but nothing happened.

Heart thumping hard in his chest, Jake hurried after his companions.

### 3

The Topeka Zoo (the *World Famous Topeka Zoo*, according to the signs) was full of empty cages and dead animals. Some of the animals that had been freed were gone, but others had died near to hand. The big apes were still in the area marked Gorilla Habitat, and they appeared to have died hand-in-hand. That made Eddie feel like crying, somehow. Since the last of the heroin had washed out of his system, his emotions always seemed on the verge of blowing up into a cyclone. His old pals would have laughed.

Beyond Gorilla Habitat, a gray wolf lay dead on the path. Oy approached it carefully, sniffed, then stretched out his long neck and began to howl.

"Make him quit that, Jake, you hear me?" Eddie said gruffly. He suddenly realized he could smell decaying animals. The aroma was faint, mostly boiled off over the hot days of the summer just passed, but what was left made him feel like upchucking. Not that he could precisely remember the last time he'd eaten.

"Oy! To me!"

Oy howled one final time, then returned to Jake. He stood on the kid's feet, looking up at him with those spooky wedding-ring eyes of his. Jake picked him up, took him in a circle around the wolf, and then set him down again on the brick path.

The path led them to a steep set of steps (weeds had begun to push through the stonework already), and at the top Roland looked back over the zoo and the gardens. From here they could easily see the circuit the toy train-tracks made, allowing Charlie's riders to tour the entire perimeter of Gage Park. Beyond it, fallen leaves clattered down Gage Boulevard before a rush of cold wind.

"So fell Lord Perth," murmured Roland.

"And the countryside did shake with that thunder," Jake finished.

Roland looked down at him with surprise, like a man awakening from a deep sleep, then smiled and put an arm around Jake's shoulders. "I have played Lord

Perth in my time," he said.

"Have you?"

"Yes. Very soon now you shall hear."

4

Beyond the steps was an aviary full of dead exotic birds; beyond the aviary was a snackbar advertising (perhaps heartlessly, given the location) topeka's best buffaloburger; beyond the snackbar was another wrought iron arch with a sign reading come back to gage park real soon! Beyond this was the curving upslope of a limited-access-highway entrance ramp. Above it, the green signs they had first spotted from across the way stood clear.

"Tumpikin' again," Eddie said in a voice almost too low to hear. "Goddam." Then he sighed.

"What's tumpikin', Eddie?"

Jake didn't think Eddie was going to answer; when Susannah craned around to look at him as he stood with his fingers wrapped around the handles of the new wheelchair, Eddie looked away. Then he looked back, first at Susannah, then at Jake. "It's not pretty. Not much about my life before Gary Cooper here yanked me across the Great Divide was."

"You don't have to—"

"It's also no big deal. A bunch of us would get together—me, my brother Henry, Bum O'Hara, usually, 'cause he had a car, Sandra Corbitt, and maybe this friend of Henry's we called Jimmie Polio—and we'd stick all our names in a hat. The one we drew out was the ... the trip-guide, Henry used to call him. He—she, if it was Sandi—had to stay straight. Relatively, anyway. Everyone else got seriously goobered. Then we'd all pile into Bum's Chrysler and go up 1-95 into Connecticut or maybe take the Taconic Parkway into upstate New York . . . only we called it the Catatonic Parkway. Listen to Creedence or Marvin Gaye or maybe even *Elvis's Greatest Hits* on the tape-player.

"It was better at night, best when the moon was full. We'd cruise for hours sometimes with our heads stuck out the windows like dogs do when they're riding, looking up at the moon and watching for shooting stars. We called it tumpikin'." Eddie smiled. It looked like an effort. "A charm-ing life, folks."

"It sounds sort of fun," Jake said. "Not the drug part, I mean, but rid-ing around with your pals at night, looking at the moon and listening to the music . . . that sounds excellent."

"It was, actually," Eddie said. "Even stuffed so full of reds we were as apt to pee on our own shoes as in the bushes, it was excellent." He paused. "That's the horrible part, don't you get it?"

"Tumpikin'," the gunslinger said. "Let's do some."

They left Gage Park and crossed the road to the entrance ramp.

5

Someone had spray-painted over both signs marking the ramp's ascend-ing curve. On the one reading st. louis 215, someone had slashed

**WATCH FOR THE WALKIN DUDE**

in black. On the one marked next rest area 10 mi.,

**ALL HAIL THE CRIMSON KING!**

had been written in fat red letters. That scarlet was still bright enough to scream even after an entire summer. Each had been decorated with a symbol—



"Do you know what any of that truck means, Roland?" Susannah asked. Roland shook his head, but he looked troubled, and that introspective look never left his own eyes. They went on.

At the place where the ramp merged with the turnpike, the two men, the boy, and the bumbler clustered around Susannah in her new wheelchair. All of them looked east.

Eddie didn't know what the traffic situation would be like once they cleared Topeka, but here all the lanes, those headed west as well as the eastbound ones on their side, were crammed with cars and trucks. Most of the vehicles were piled high with possessions gone rusty with a season's worth of rain.

But the traffic was the least of their concerns as they stood there, looking silently eastward. For half a mile or so on either side of them, the city continued—they could see church steeples, a strip of fast food places (Arby's, Wendy's, McD's, Pizza Hut, and one Eddie had never heard of called Boing Boing Burgers), car dealerships, the roof of a bowling alley called Heartland Lanes. They could see another turnpike exit ahead, the sign by the ramp reading Topeka State Hospital and S.W. 6th. Beyond the off-ramp there bulked a massive old red brick edifice with tiny windows peering like desperate eyes out of the climbing ivy. Eddie figured a place that looked so much like Attica *had* to be a hospital, probably the kind of welfare purgatory where poor folks sat in shitty plastic chairs for hours on end, all so some doctor could look at them like they were dogshit.

Beyond the hospital, the city abruptly ended and the thinny began.

To Eddie, it looked like flat water standing in a vast marshland. It crowded up to the raised barrel of 1-70 on both sides, silvery and shim-mering, making the signs and guardrails and stalled cars waver like mi-rages; it gave off that liquidy humming sound like a stench.

Susannah put her hands to her ears, her mouth drawn down. "I don't know as I can stand it. Really. I don't mean to be spleeny, but already I feel like vomiting, and I haven't had anything to eat all day."

Eddie felt the same way. Yet, sick as he felt he could hardly take his eyes away from the thinny. It was as if unreality had been given . . . what? A face? No. The vast and humming silver shimmer ahead of them had no face, was the very antithesis of a face, in fact, but it had a body ... an as-pect ... a *presence*.

Yes; that last was best. It had a presence, as the demon which had come to the

circle of stones while they were trying to draw Jake had had a presence.

Roland, meanwhile, was rummaging in the depths of his purse. He appeared to dig all the way to the bottom before finding what he wanted: a fistful of bullets. He plucked Susannah's right hand off the arm of her chair, and put two of the bullets in her palm. Then he took two more and poked them, slug ends first, into his ears. Susannah looked first amazed, then amused, then doubtful. In the end, she followed his example. Almost at once an expression of blissful relief filled her face.

Eddie unshouldered the pack he wore and pulled out the half-full box of .44s that went with Jake's Ruger. The gunslinger shook his head and held out his hand. There were still four bullets in it, two for Eddie and two for Jake.

"What's wrong with these?" Eddie shook a couple of shells from the box that had come from behind the hanging files in Elmer Chambers's desk drawer.

"They're from your world and they won't block out the sound. Don't ask me how I know that; I just do. Try them if you want, but they won't work."

Eddie pointed at the bullets Roland was offering. "Those are from our world, too. The gun-shop on Seventh and Forty-ninth. Clements', wasn't that the name?"

"These didn't come from there. These are mine, Eddie, reloaded often but originally brought from the green land. From Gilead."

"You mean the *wets*?" Eddie asked incredulously. "The last of the wet shells from the beach? The ones that really got soaked?"

Roland nodded.

"You said those would never fire again! No matter how dry they got! That the powder had been . . . what did you say? 'Flattened.' "

Roland nodded again.

"So why'd you save them? Why bring a bunch of useless bullets all this way?"

"What did I teach you to say after a kill, Eddie? In order to focus your mind?"

" 'Father, guide my hands and heart so that no part of the animal will be wasted.' "

Roland nodded a third time. Jake took two shells and put them in his ears. Eddie took the last two, but first he tried the ones he'd shaken from the box. They muffled the sound of the thinny, but it was still there, vi-brating in the center of his forehead, making his eyes water the way they did when he had a cold, making the bridge of his nose feel like it was go-ing to explode. He picked them out, and put the bigger slugs—the ones from Roland's ancient revolvers—in their place.

*Putting bullets in my ears*, he thought. *Ma would shit*. But that didn't matter. The sound of the thinny was gone—or at least down to a distant drone—and that was what did. When he turned and spoke to Roland, he expected his own voice to sound muffled, the way it did when you were wearing earplugs, but he found he could hear himself pretty well.

"Is there anything you *don't* know?" he asked Roland.

"Yes," Roland said. "Quite a lot."

"What about Oy?" Jake asked.

"Oy will be fine, I think," Roland said. "Come on, let's make some miles before dark."

## 7

Oy didn't seem bothered by the warble of the thinny, but he stuck close to Jake Chambers all that afternoon, looking mistrustfully at the stalled cars which clogged the eastbound lanes of 1-70. And yet, Susannah saw, those cars did not clog the highway completely. The congestion eased as the travellers left downtown behind them, but even where the traffic had been heavy, some of the dead vehicles had been pulled to one side or the other; a number had been pushed right off the highway and onto the median strip, which was a concrete divider in the metro area and grass outside of town.

*Somebody's been at work with a wrecker, that's my guess*, Susannah thought. The idea made her happy. No one would have bothered clearing a path down the center of the highway while the plague was still raging, and if someone had done it after—if someone had been *around* to do it after—that meant the plague hadn't gotten everyone; those crammed-together obituaries weren't the whole story. There were corpses in some of the cars, but they, like the ones at the foot of the station steps, were dry, not runny—mummies wearing seat-belts, for the most part. The majority of the cars were empty. A lot of the drivers and passengers caught in the traffic jams had probably tried to walk out of the plague-zone, she supposed, but she guessed that wasn't the only reason they had taken to their feet.

Susannah knew that she herself would have to be chained to the steering wheel to keep her inside a car once she felt the symptoms of some fatal disease setting in; if she was going to die, she would want to do it in God's open air. A hill would be



best, someplace with a little elevation, but even a wheatfield would do, came it to that. Anything but coughing your last while smelling the air-freshener dangling from the rearview mirror.

At one time Susannah guessed they would have been able to see many of the corpses of the fleeing dead, but not now. Because of the thinny. They approached it steadily, and she knew exactly when they entered it. A kind of tingling shudder ran through her body, making her draw her shortened legs up, and the wheelchair stopped for a moment. When she turned around she saw Roland, Eddie, and Jake holding their stomachs and grimacing. They looked as if they had all been stricken with the bellyache at the same time. Then Eddie and Roland straightened up. Jake bent to stroke Oy, who had been staring at him anxiously.

"You boys all right?" Susannah asked. The question came out in the half-querulous, half-humorous voice of Detta Walker. Using that voice was nothing she planned; sometimes it just came out.

"Yeah," Jake said. "Feels like I got a bubble in my throat, though." He was staring uneasily at the thinny. Its silvery blankness was all around them now, as if the whole world had turned into a flat Norfolk fen at dawn. Nearby, trees poked out of its silver surface, casting distorted reflections that never stayed quite still or quite in focus. A little farther away, Susannah could see a grain-storage tower, seeming to float. The words gaddish feeds were written on the side in pink letters which might have been red under normal conditions.

"Feels to me like I got a bubble in my *mind*," Eddie said. "Man, look at that shit shimmer."

"Can you still hear it?" Susannah asked.

"Yeah. But faint. I can live with it. Can you?"

"Uh-huh. Let's go."

It was like riding in an open-cockpit plane through broken clouds, Susannah decided. They'd go for what felt like miles through that humming brightness that was not quite fog and not quite water, sometimes seeing shapes (a bam, a tractor, a Stuckey's billboard) loom out of it, then losing everything but the road, which ran consistently above the thinny's bright but somehow indistinct surface.

Then, all at once, they would run into the clear. The humming would fall away to a faint drone; you could even unplug your ears and not be too bothered, at least until you got near the other side of the break. Once again there were vistas ...

Well, no, that was too grand, Kansas didn't exactly *have* vistas, but there were open fields and the occasional copse of autumn-bright trees marking a spring or cow-pond. No Grand Canyon or surf crashing on Portland Headlight, hut at least you could see a by-God *horizon* off in the distance, and lose some of that unpleasant feeling of entombment. Then, back into the goop you went. Jake came closest to describing it, she thought, when he said that being in the thinny was like finally reaching the shining water-mirage you could often see far up the highway on hot days.

Whatever it was and however you described it, being inside it was claustrophobic, purgatorial, all the world gone except for the twin barrels of the turnpike and the hulks of the cars, like derelict ships abandoned on a frozen ocean.

*Please help us get out of this*, Susannah prayed to a God in whom she no longer precisely believed—she still believed in *something*, but since awakening to Roland's world on the beach of the Western Sea, her concept of the invisible world had changed considerably. *Please help us find the Beam again. Please help us escape this world of silence and death.*

They ran into the biggest clear space they had yet come to near a roadsign which read big springs 2 mi. Behind them, in the west, the setting sun shone through a brief rift in the clouds, skipping scarlet splinters across the top of the thinny and lighting the windows and taillights of the stalled cars in tones of fire. On either side of them empty fields stretched away. *Full Earth come and gone*, Susannah thought. *Reaping come and gone, too. This is what Roland calls closing the year.* The thought made her shiver.

"We'll camp here for the night," Roland said soon after they had passed the Big Springs exit ramp. Up ahead they could see the thinny encroaching on the highway again, but that was miles farther on—you could see a damn long way in eastern Kansas, Susannah was discovering. "We can get firewood without going too near the thinny, and the sound won't be too bad. We may even be able to sleep without bullets stuffed into our ears."

Eddie and Jake climbed over the guardrails, descended the bank, and foraged for wood along a dry creekbed, staying together as Roland admonished them to do. When they came back, the clouds had gulped the sun again, and an ashy, uninteresting twilight had begun to creep over the world.

The gunslinger stripped twigs for kindling, then laid his fuel around them in his

usual fashion, building a kind of wooden chimney in the breakdown lane. As he did it, Eddie strolled across to the median strip and stood there, hands in pockets, looking east. After a few moments, Jake and Oy joined him.

Roland produced his flint and steel, scraped fire into the shaft of his chimney, and soon the little campfire was burning.

"Roland!" Eddie called. "Suze! Come over here! Look at this!"

Susannah started rolling her chair toward Eddie, then Roland—after a final check of his campfire—took hold of the handles and pushed her.

"Look at what?" Susannah asked.

Eddie pointed. At first Susannah saw nothing, although the turnpike was perfectly visible even beyond the point where the thinny closed in again, perhaps three miles ahead. Then ... yes, she might see something. Maybe. A kind of shape, at the farthest edge of vision. If not for the fading daylight...

"Is it a building?" Jake asked. "Cripes, it looks like it's built right across the highway!"

"What about it, Roland?" Eddie asked. "You've got the best eyes in the universe." For a time the gunslinger said nothing, only looked up the median strip with his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. At last he said, "We'll see it better when we get closer."

"Oh, come on!" Eddie said. "I mean, holy shit! Do you know what it is or not?"

"We'll see it better when we get closer," the gunslinger repeated ... which was, of course, no answer at all. He moseyed back across the east-bound lanes to check on his campfire, bootheels clicking on the pavement. Susannah looked at Jake and Eddie. She shrugged. They shrugged back . . . and then Jake burst into bright peals of laughter. Usually, Susannah thought, the kid acted more like an eighteen-year-old than a boy of eleven, but that laughter made him sound about nine-going-on-ten, and she didn't mind a bit.

She looked down at Oy, who was looking at them earnestly and rolling his shoulders in an effort to shrug.

They ate the leaf-wrapped delicacies Eddie called gunslinger burritos, drawing closer to the fire and feeding it more wood as the dark drew down. Somewhere

south a bird cried out—it was just about the loneliest sound he had ever heard in his life, Eddie reckoned. None of them talked much, and it occurred to him that, at this time of their day, hardly anyone ever did. As if the time when the earth swapped day for dark was special, a time that somehow closed them off from the powerful fellowship Roland called *ka-tet*.

Jake fed Oy small scraps of dried deermeat from his last burrito; Su-sannah sat on her bedroll, legs crossed beneath her hide smock, looking dreamily into the fire; Roland lay back on his elbows, looking up at the sky, where the clouds had begun to melt away from the stars. Looking up himself, Eddie saw that Old Star and Old Mother were gone, their places taken by Polaris and the Big Dipper. This might not be his world—Takuro automobiles, the Kansas City Monarchs, and a food franchise called Boing Boing Burgers all suggested it wasn't—but Eddie thought it was too close for comfort. *Maybe*, he thought, *the world next door*.

When the bird cried in the distance again, he roused himself and looked at Roland. "You had something you were going to tell us," he said. "A thrilling tale of your youth, I believe. Susan—that was her name, wasn't it?"

For a moment longer the gunslinger continued to look up at the sky—now it was Roland who must find himself adrift in the constellations, Eddie realized—and then he shifted his gaze to his friends. He looked strangely apologetic, strangely uneasy. "Would you think I was cozen-ing," he said, "if I asked for one more day to think of these things? Or perhaps it's a night to dream of them that I really want. They are old things, dead things, perhaps, but I. . ." He raised his hands in a kind of distracted gesture. "Some things don't rest easy even when they're dead. Their bones cry out from the ground."

"There are ghosts," Jake said, and in his eyes Eddie saw a shadow of the horror he must have felt inside the house in Dutch Hill. The horror he must have felt when the Doorkeeper came out of the wall and reached for him. "Sometimes there are ghosts, and sometimes they come back."

"Yes," Roland said. "Sometimes there are, and sometimes they do."

"Maybe it's better not to brood," Susannah said. "Sometimes—especially when you know a thing's going to be hard—it's better just to get on your horse and ride." Roland thought this over carefully, then raised his eyes to look at her. "At tomorrow night's fire I will tell you of Susan," he said. "This I promise on my father's name."

"Do we need to hear?" Eddie asked abruptly. He was almost astounded to hear this question coming out of his mouth; no one had been more curious about the gunslinger's past than Eddie himself. "I mean, if it really hurts, Roland . . . hurts big-time . . . maybe..."

"I'm not sure you need to hear, but I think I need to tell. Our future is the Tower, and to go toward it with a whole heart, I must put my past to rest as best I may. There's no way I could tell you all of it—in my world even the past is in motion, rearranging itself in many vital ways—but this one story may stand for all the rest."

"Is it a Western?" Jake asked suddenly.

Roland looked at him, puzzled. "I don't take your meaning, Jake. Gilead is a Barony of the Western World, yes, and Mejis as well, but—"

"It'll be a Western," Eddie said. "All Roland's stories are Westerns, when you get right down to it." He lay back and pulled his blanket over him. Faintly, from both east and west, he could hear the warble of the thinny. He checked in his pocket for the bullets Roland had given him, and nodded with satisfaction when he felt them. He reckoned he could sleep without them tonight, but he would want them again tomorrow. They weren't done tumpikin' just yet.

Susannah leaned over him, kissed the tip of his nose. "Done for the day, sugar?"

"Yep," Eddie said, and laced his hands together behind his head. "It's not every day that I hook a ride on the world's fastest train, destroy the world's smartest computer, and then discover that everyone's been scragged by the flu. All before dinner, too. Shit like that makes a man tired." Eddie smiled and closed his eyes. He was still smiling when sleep took him.

## 9

In his dream, they were all standing on the corner of Second Avenue and Forty-sixth Street, looking over the short board fence and into the weedy vacant lot behind it. They were wearing their Mid-World clothes—a mot-ley combination of deerskin and old shirts, mostly held together with spit and shoelaces—but none of the pedestrians hurrying by on Second seemed to notice. No one noticed the billy-bumbler in Jake's arms or the artillery they were packing, either.

*Because we're ghosts.* Eddie thought. *We're ghosts and we don't rest easy.*

On the fence there were handbills—one for the Sex Pistols (a reunion tour, according to the poster, and Eddie thought that was pretty funny—the Pistols was one group that was *never* going to get back together), one for a comic, Adam Sandier, that Eddie had never heard of, one for a movie called *The Craft*, about teenage witches. Beyond that one, written in letters the dusky pink of summer roses, was this:

See the bear of fearsome size!  
All the world's within his eyes.  
time grows thin, the past's a riddle;  
The tower awaits you in the middle.

*"There, "* Jake said, pointing. *"The rose. See how it awaits us, there in the middle of the lot. "*

*"Yes, it's very beautiful, "* Susannah said. Then she pointed to the sign standing near the rose and facing Second Avenue. Her voice and her eyes were troubled.

*"But what about that? "*

According to the sign, two outfits—Mills Construction and Sombra Real Estate—were going to combine on something called Turtle Bay Condominiums, said condos to be erected on this very spot. When? com-ing soon was all the sign had to say in that regard.

*"I wouldn't worry about that, "* Jake said. *"That sign was here before. It's probably old as the hi—"*

At that moment the revving sound of an engine tore into the air. From beyond the fence, on the Forty-sixth Street side of the lot, chugs of dirty brown exhaust ascended like bad-news smoke signals. Suddenly the boards on that side burst open, and a huge red bulldozer lunged through. Even the blade was red, although the words slashed across its scoop—all hail the crimson king—were written in a yellow as bright as panic. Sit-ting in the peak-seat, his rotting face leering at them from above the con-trols, was the man who had kidnapped Jake from the bridge over the River Send—their old pal Gasher. On the front of his cocked-back hard-hat, the words lamerk foundry stood out in black. Above them, a single staring eye had been painted.

Gasher lowered the 'dozer's blade. It tore across the lot on a diagonal, smashing

brick, pulverizing beer and soda bottles to glittering powder, striking sparks from the rocks. Directly in its path, the rose nodded its delicate head.

*"Let's see you ask some of yer silly questions now!"* this unwelcome apparition cried. *"Ask all yer wants, my dear little culls, why not? Wery fond of riddles is yer old pal Gasher! Just so you understand that, no mat-ter what yer ask, I'm gointer run that nasty thing over, mash it flat, aye, so I will! Then back over it I'll go! Root and branch, my dear little culls! Aye, root and branch!"*

Susannah shrieked as the scarlet bulldozer blade bore down on the rose, and Eddie grabbed for the fence. He would vault over it, throw him-self on the rose, try to protect it...

... except it was too late. And he knew it.

He looked back up at the cackling thing in the bulldozer's peak-seat and saw that Gasher was gone. Now the man at the controls was Engineer Bob, from *Charlie the Choo-Choo*.

*"Stop!"* Eddie screamed. *"For Christ's sake, stop!"*

*"I can't, Eddie. The world has moved on, and I can't stop. I must move on with it."*

And as the shadow of the 'dozer fell over the rose, as the blade tore through one of the posts holding up the sign (Eddie saw coming soon had changed to coming now), he realized that the man at the controls wasn't Engineer Bob, either.

It was Roland.

## 10

Eddie sat up in the breakdown lane of the turnpike, gasping breath he could see in the air and with sweat already chilling on his hot skin. He was sure he had screamed, *must* have screamed, but Susannah still slept beside him with only the top of her head poking out of the bedroll they shared, and Jake was snoring softly off to the left, one arm out of his own blankets and curled around Oy. The bumbler was also sleeping.

Roland wasn't. Roland sat calmly on the far side of the dead campfire, cleaning his guns by starlight and looking at Eddie.

"Bad dreams." Not a question.

"Yeah."

"A visit from your brother?"

Eddie shook his head.

"The Tower, then? The field of roses and the Tower?" Roland's face remained impassive, but Eddie could hear the subtle eagerness which always came into his voice when the subject was the Dark Tower. Eddie had once called the gunslinger a Tower junkie, and Roland hadn't denied it.

"Not this time."

"What, then?"

Eddie shivered. "Cold."

"Yes. Thank your gods there's no rain, at least. Autumn rain's an evil to be avoided whenever one may. What was your dream?"

Still Eddie hesitated. "You'd never betray us, would you, Roland?"

"No man can say that for sure, Eddie, and I have already played the betrayer more than once. To my shame. But ... I think those days are over. We are one, *ka-tet*. If I betray any one of you—even Jake's furry friend, perhaps—I betray myself. Why do you ask?"

"And you'd never betray your quest."

"Renounce the Tower? No, Eddie. Not that, not ever. Tell me your dream."

Eddie did, omitting nothing. When he had finished, Roland looked down at his guns, frowning. They seemed to have reassembled themselves while Eddie was talking.

"So what does it mean, that I saw you driving that 'dozer at the end? That I still don't trust you? That subconsciously—"

"Is this ology-of-the-psyche? The cabala I have heard you and Susan-nah speak of?"

"Yes, I guess it is."

"It's shit," Roland said dismissively. "Mudpies of the mind. Dreams either mean nothing or everything—and when they mean everything, they almost always come as messages from . . . well, from other levels of the Tower." He gazed at Eddie shrewdly. "And not all messages are sent by friends."

"Something or someone is fucking with my head? Is that what you mean?"

"I think it possible. But you must watch me all the same. I bear watching, as you well know."

"I trust you," Eddie said, and the very awkwardness with which he spoke lent his words sincerity. Roland looked touched, almost shaken, and Eddie wondered how



he ever could have thought this man an emotionless robot. Roland might be a little short on imagination, but he had feelings, all right.

"One thing about your dream concerns me very much, Eddie."

"The bulldozer?"

"The machine, yes. The threat to the rose."

"Jake saw the rose, Roland. It was fine."

Roland nodded. "In his when, the when of that particular day, the rose was thriving. But that doesn't mean it will continue to do so. If the construction the sign spoke of comes . . . if the *bulldozer* comes ..."

"There are other worlds than these," Eddie said. "Remember?"

"Some things may exist only in one. In one *where*, in one *when*." Roland lay down and looked up at the stars. "We must protect that rose," he said. "We must protect it at all costs."

"You think it's another door, don't you? One that opens on the Dark Tower."

The gunslinger looked at him from eyes that ran with starshine. "I think it may *be* the Tower," he said. "And if it's destroyed—"

His eyes closed. He said no more.

Eddie lay awake late.

## 11

The new day dawned clear and bright and cold. In the strong morning sunlight, the thing Eddie had spotted the evening before was more clearly visible . . . but he still couldn't tell what it was. Another riddle, and he was getting damned sick of them. He stood squinting at it, shading his eyes from the sun, with Susannah on one side of him and Jake on the other. Roland was back by the camp-fire, packing what he called their *gunna*, a word which seemed to mean all their worldly goods. He appeared not to be concerned with the thing up ahead, or to know what it was. How far away? Thirty miles? Fifty? The answer seemed to depend on how far could you see in all this flat land, and Eddie didn't know the answer. One thing he felt quite sure of was that Jake had been right on at least two counts—it was some kind of building, and it sprawled across all four lanes of the highway. It must; how else could they see it? It would have been lost in the thinny ... wouldn't it? *Maybe it's standing in one of those open patches—what Suze calls "the holes in*

*the clouds." Or maybe the thinny ends before we get that far. Or maybe it's a goddam hallucination. In any case, you might as well put it out of your mind for the time being. Got a little more turnpikin' to do.*

Still, the building held him. It looked like an airy Arabian Nights confection of blue and gold . . . except Eddie had an idea that the blue was stolen from the sky and the gold from the newly risen sun.

"Roland, come here a second!"

At first he didn't think the gunslinger would, but then Roland cinched a rawhide lace on Susannah's pack, rose, put his hands in the small of his back, stretched, and walked over to them.

"Gods, one would think no one in this band has the wit to housekeep but me," Roland said.

"We'll pitch in," Eddie said, "we always do, don't we? But look at that thing first." Roland did, but only with a quick glance, as if he did not even want to acknowledge it.

"It's glass, isn't it?" Eddie asked.

Roland took another brief look. "I wot," he said, a phrase which seemed to mean *Reckon so, partner*.

"We've got lots of glass buildings where I come from, but most of them are office buildings. That thing up ahead looks more like something from Disney World. Do you know what it is?"

"No."

"Then why don't you want to look at it?" Susannah asked.

Roland *did* take another look at the distant blaze of light on glass, but once again it was quick—little more than a peek.

"Because it's trouble," Roland said, "and it's in our road. We'll get there in time. No need to live in trouble until trouble comes."

"Will we get there today?" Jake asked.

Roland shrugged, his face still closed. "There'll be water if God wills it," he said.

"Christ, you could have made a fortune writing fortune cookies," Eddie said. He hoped for a smile, at least, but got none. Roland simply walked back across the road, dropped to one knee, shouldered his purse and his pack, and waited for the others. When they were ready, the pilgrims resumed their walk east along Interstate 70. The gunslinger led, walking with his head down and his eyes on the

toes of his boots.

## 12

Roland was quiet all day, and as the building ahead of them neared (*trouble, and in our road*, he had said), Susannah came to realize it wasn't grumpiness they were seeing, or worry about anything which lay any farther ahead of them than tonight. It was the story he'd promised to tell them that Roland was thinking about, and he was a lot more than worried.

By the time they stopped for their noon meal, they could clearly see the building ahead—a many-turreted palace which appeared to be made entirely of reflective glass. The thinny lay close around it, but the palace rose serenely above all, its turrets trying for the sky. Madly strange here in the flat countryside of eastern Kansas, of course it was, but Susannah thought it the most beautiful building she had ever seen in her life; even more beautiful than the Chrysler Building, and that was going some.

As they drew closer, she found it more and more difficult to look else-where. Watching the reflections of the puffy clouds sailing across the glass castle's blue-sky wains and walls was like watching some splendid illusion ... yet there was a solidity to it, as well. An inarguability. Some of that was probably just the shadow it threw—mirages did not, so far as she knew, create shadows—but not all. It just *was*. She had no idea what such a fabulosity was doing out here in the land of Stuckey's and Hardee's (not to mention Boing Boing Burgers), but there it was. She reckoned that time would tell the rest.

## 13

They made camp in silence, watched Roland build the wooden chimney that would be their fire in silence, then sat before it in silence, watching the sunset turn the huge glass edifice ahead of them into a castle of fire. Its towers and battlements glowed first a fierce red, then orange, then a gold which cooled rapidly to ocher as Old Star appeared in the firmament above them—*No*, she thought in Delta's voice. *Ain't dat one, girl. Not 'tall. That's the North Star. Same one you seen back home, sittin on yo' daddy's lap.*

But it was Old Star she wanted, she discovered; Old Star and Old Mother. She was astounded to find herself homesick for Roland's world, and then wondered why she should be so surprised. It was a world, after all, where no one had called her a nigger bitch (at least not yet), a world where she had found someone to love . . . and made good friends as well. That last made her feel a little bit like crying, and she hugged Jake to her. He let himself be hugged, smiling, his eyes half-closed. At some distance, unpleasant but bearable even without bullet earplugs, the thinny warbled its moaning song.

When the last traces of yellow began to fade from the castle up the road, Roland left them to sit in the turnpike travel lane and returned to his fire. He cooked more leaf-wrapped deermeat, and handed the food around. They ate in silence (Roland actually ate almost nothing, Susannah observed). By the time they were finished, they could see the Milky Way scattered across the walls of the castle ahead of them, fierce points of reflection that burned like fire in still water.

Eddie was the one who finally broke the silence. "You don't have to," he said. "You're excused. Or absolved. Or whatever the hell it is you need to take that look off your face."

Roland ignored him. He drank, tilting the waterskin up on his elbow like some hick drinking moonshine from a jug, head back, eyes on the stars. The last mouthful he spat to the roadside.

"Life for your crop," Eddie said. He did not smile.

Roland said nothing, but his cheek went pale, as if he had seen a ghost. Or heard one.

## 14

The gunslinger turned to Jake, who looked back at him seriously. "I went through the trial of manhood at the age of fourteen, the youngest of my *ka-tel*—of my class, you would say—and perhaps the youngest ever. I told you some of that, Jake. Do you remember?"

*You told all of us some of that*, Susannah thought, but kept her mouth shut, and warned Eddie with her eyes to do the same. Roland hadn't been himself during that telling; with Jake both dead and alive within his head, the man had been fighting madness.

"You mean when we were chasing Walter," Jake said. "After the way station but before I... I took my fall."

"That's right."

"I remember a little, but that's all. The way you remember the stuff you dream about."

Roland nodded. "Listen, then. I would tell you more this time, Jake, because you are older. I suppose we all are."

Susannah was no less fascinated with the story the second time: how the boy Roland had chanced to discover Marten, his father's advisor (his father's *wizard*) in his mother's apartment. Only none of it had been by chance, of course; the boy would have passed her door with no more than a glance had Marten not opened it and invited him in. Marten had told Roland that his mother wanted to see him, but one look at her rueful smile and downcast eyes as she sat in her low-back chair told the boy he was the last person in the world Gabrielle Deschain wanted to see just then.

The flush on her cheek and the love-bite on the side of her neck told him everything else.

Thus had he been goaded by Marten into an early trial of manhood, and by employing a weapon his teacher had not expected—his hawk, David—Roland had defeated Cort, taken his stick ... and made the enemy of his life in Marten Broadcloak.

Beaten badly, face swelling into something that looked like a child's goblin mask, slipping toward a coma, Cort had fought back unconscious-ness long enough to offer his newest apprentice gunslinger counsel: stay away from Marten yet awhile, Cort had said.

"He told me to let the story of our battle grow into a legend," the gun-slinger told Eddie, Susannah, and Jake. "To wait until my shadow had grown hair on its face and haunted Marten in his dreams."

"Did you take his advice?" Susannah asked.

"I never got a chance," Roland said. His face cracked in a rueful, painful smile. "I meant to think about it, and seriously, but before I even got started on my thinking, things ... changed."

"They have a way of doing that, don't they?" Eddie said. "My good-ness, yes."

"I buried my hawk, the first weapon I ever wielded, and perhaps the finest.

Then—and this part I'm sure I didn't tell you before, Jake—I went into the lower town. That summer's heat broke in storms full of thunder and hail, and in a room above one of the brothels where Cort had been wont to roister, I lay with a woman for the first time."

He poked a stick thoughtfully into the fire, seemed to become aware of the unconscious symbolism in what he was doing, and threw it away with a lopsided grin. It landed, smoldering, near the tire of an abandoned Dodge Aspen and went out.

"It was good. The sex was good. Not the great thing I and my friends had thought about and whispered about and wondered about, of course—"

"I think store-bought pussy tends to be overrated by the young, sugar," Susannah said.

"I fell asleep listening to the sots downstairs singing along with the piano and to the sound of hail on the window. I awoke the next morning in ... well. . . let's just say I awoke in a way I never would have expected to awake in such a place."

Jake fed fresh fuel to the fire. It flared up, painting highlights on Roland's cheeks, brushing crescents of shadow beneath his brows and below his lower lip. And as he talked, Susannah found she could almost see what had happened on that long-ago morning that must have smelled of wet cobblestones and rain-sweetened summer air; what had happened in a whore's crib above a drinking-dive in the lower town of Gilead, Barony seat of New Canaan, one small mote of land located in the western regions of Mid-World.

One boy, still aching from his battle of the day before and newly educated in the mysteries of sex. One boy, now looking twelve instead of fourteen, his lashes dusting down thick upon his cheeks, the lids shuttering those extraordinary blue eyes; one boy with his hand loosely cupping a whore's breast, his hawk-scarred wrist lying tanned upon the counter-pane. One boy in the final instants of his life's last good sleep, one boy who will shortly be in motion, who will be falling as a dislodged pebble falls on a steep and broken slope of scree; a falling pebble that strikes another, and another, and another, those pebbles striking yet more, until the whole slope is in motion and the earth shakes with the sound of the landslide.

One boy, one pebble on a slope loose and ready to slide.

A knot exploded in the fire. Somewhere in this dream of Kansas, an animal yipped. Susannah watched sparks swirl up past Roland's incredibly ancient face

and saw in that face the sleeping boy of a summer's mom, lying in a bawd's bed. And then she saw the door crash open, ending Gilead's last troubled dream.

## 15

The man who strode in, crossing the room to the bed before Roland could open his eyes (and before the woman beside him had even begun to register the sound), was tall, slim, dressed in faded jeans and a dusty shirt of blue chambray. On his head was a dark gray hat with a snakeskin band. Lying low on his hips were two old leather holsters. Jutting from them were the sandalwood grips of the pistols the boy would someday bear to lands of which this scowling man with the furious blue eyes would never dream.

Roland was in motion even before he was able to unseal his eyes, rolling to the left, groping beneath the bed for what was there. He was fast, so fast it was scary, but—and Susannah saw this, too, saw it clearly—the man in the faded jeans was faster yet. He grabbed the boy's shoulder and yanked, turning him naked out of bed and onto the floor. The boy sprawled there, reaching again for what was beneath the bed, lightning-quick. The man in the jeans stamped down on his fingers before they could grasp.

"Bastard!" the boy gasped. "Oh, you bas—"

But now his eyes were open, he looked up, and saw that the invading bastard was his father.

The whore was sitting up now, her eyes puffy, her face slack and petulant. "Here!" she cried. "Here, here! You can't just be a-comin in like that, so you can't! Why, if I was to raise my voice—"

Ignoring her, the man reached beneath the bed and dragged out two gunbelts. Near the end of each was a bolstered revolver. They were large, and amazing in this largely gunless world, but they were not so large as those worn by Roland's father, and the grips were eroded metal plates rather than inlaid wood. When the whore saw the guns on the invader's hips and the ones in his hands—the ones her young customer of the night before had been wearing until she had taken him upstairs and divested him of all weapons save for the one with which she was most familiar—the expression of sleepy petulance left her face. What replaced it was the foxlike look of a born survivor. She was up, out of bed, across the floor, and

out the door before her bare bum had more than a brief moment to twinkle in the morning sun.

Neither the father standing by the bed nor the son lying naked upon the floor at his feet so much as looked at her. The man in the jeans held out the gunbelts which Roland had taken from the fuzer beneath the ap-prentices' barracks on the previous afternoon, using Cort's key to open the arsenal door. The man shook the belts under Roland's very nose, as one might hold a torn garment beneath the nose of a feckless puppy that has chewed. He shook them so hard that one of the guns tumbled free. Despite his stupefaction, Roland caught it in midair.

"I thought you were in the west," Roland said. "In Cressia. After Far-son and his—"

Roland's father slapped him hard enough to send the boy tumbling across the room and into a corner with blood pouring from one corner of his mouth. Roland's first, appalling instinct was to raise the gun he still held.

Steven Deschain looked at him, hands on hips, reading this thought even before it was fully formed. His lips pulled back in a singularly mirth-less grin, one that showed all of his teeth and most of his gums.

"Shoot me if you will. Why not? Make this abortion complete. Ah, gods, I'd welcome it!"

Roland laid the gun on the floor and pushed it away, using the back of his hand to do it. All at once he wanted his fingers nowhere near the trigger of a gun. They were no longer fully under his control, those fingers. He had discovered that yesterday, right around the time he had broken Cort's nose.

"Father, I was tested yesterday. I took Cort's stick. I won. I'm a man."

"You're a fool," his father said. His grin was gone now; he looked haggard and old. He sat down heavily on the whore's bed, looked at the gunbelts he still held, and dropped them between his feet. "You're a fourteen-year-old fool, and that's the worst, most desperate kind." He looked up, angry all over again, but Roland didn't mind; anger was better than that look of weariness. That look of age. "I've known since you toddled that you were no genius, but I never believed until yestereve that you were an idiot. To let him drive you like a cow in a chute! Gods! You have forgotten the face of your father! Say it!"

And that sparked the boy's own anger. Everything he had done the day before he had done with his father's face firmly fixed in his mind.



"That's not true!" he shouted from where he now sat with his bare butt on the splintery boards of the whore's crib and his back against the wall, the sun shining through the window and touching the fuzz on his fair, unscarred cheek.

"It *is* true, you whelp! Foolish whelp! Say your atonement or I'll strip the hide from your very—"

"They were together!" he burst out. "Your wife and your minister— your magician! I saw the mark of his mouth on her neck! *On my mother's neck!*" He reached for the gun and picked it up, but even in his shame and fury was still careful not to let his fingers stray near the trigger; he held the apprentice's revolver only by the plain, undecorated metal of its barrel. "Today I end his treacherous, seducer's life with this, and if you aren't man enough to help me, at least you can stand aside and let m—"

One of the revolvers on Steven's hip was out of its holster and in his hand before Roland's eyes saw any move. There was a single shot, deaf-ening as thunder in the little room; it was a full minute before Roland was able to hear the babble of questions and commotion from below. The 'prentice-gun, meanwhile, was long gone, blown out of his hand and leav-ing nothing behind but a kind of buzzing tingle. It flew out the window, down and gone, its grip a smashed ruin of metal and its short turn in the gunslinger's long tale at an end.

Roland looked at his father, shocked and amazed. Steven looked back, saying nothing for a long time. But now he wore the face Roland remem-bered from earliest childhood: calm and sure. The weariness and the look of half-distracted fury had passed away like last night's thunderstorms.

At last his father spoke. "I was wrong in what I said, and I apologize. You did not forget my face, Roland. But still you were foolish—you al-lowed yourself to be driven by one far slyer than you will ever be in your life. It's only by the grace of the gods and the working of *ka* that you have not been sent west, one more true gunslinger out of Marten's road . . . out of John Farson's road . . . and out of the road which leads to the creature that rules them." He stood and held out his arms. "If I had lost you, Roland, I should have died."

Roland got to his feet and went naked to his father, who embraced him fiercely. When Steven Deschain kissed him first on one cheek and then the other, Roland began to weep. Then, in Roland's ear, Steven Des-chain whispered six words.

"What?" Susannah asked. "What six words?"

" 'I have known for two years,' " Roland said. "That was what he whispered."

"Holy Christ," Eddie said.

"He told me I couldn't go back to the palace. If I did, I'd be dead by nightfall. He said, 'You have been born to your destiny in spite of all Marten could do; yet he has sworn to kill you before you can grow to be a problem to him. It seems that, winner in the test or no, you must leave Gilead anyway. For only awhile, though, and you'll go east instead of west. I'd not send you alone, either, or without a purpose.' Then, almost as an afterthought, he added: 'Or with a pair of sorry 'prentice revolvers.' "

"What purpose?" Jake asked. He had clearly been captivated by the story; his eyes shone nearly as bright as Oy's. "And which friends?"

"These things you must now hear," Roland said, "and how you judge me will come in time."

He fetched a sigh—the deep sigh of a man who contemplates some arduous piece of work—and then tossed fresh wood on the fire. As the flames flared up, driving the shadows back a little way, he began to talk. All that queerly long night he talked, not finishing the story of Susan Delgado until the sun was rising in the east and painting the glass castle yon-der with all the bright hues of a fresh day, and a strange green cast of light which was its own true color.



PART TWO  
SUSAN



# CHAPTER I

.....

## BENEATH THE KISSING MOON

A perfect disc of silver—the Kissing Moon, as it was called in Full Earth—hung above the ragged hill five miles east of Hambry and ten miles south of Eyebolt Canyon. Below the hill the late summer heat still held, suffocating even two hours after sundown, but atop the Coos, it was as if Reap had already come, with its strong breezes and frost-pinched air. For the woman who lived here with no company but a snake and one old mutie cat, it was to be a long night.

Never mind, though; never mind, my dear. Busy hands are happy hands. So they are.

She waited until the hoofbeats of her visitors' horses had faded, sit-ting quietly by the window in the hut's large room (there was only one other, a bedroom little bigger than a closet). Musty, the six-legged cat, was on her shoulder. Her lap was full of moonlight.

Three horses, bearing away three men. The Big Coffin Hunters, they called themselves.

She snorted. Men were funny, aye, so they were, and the most amus-ing thing about them was how little they knew it. Men, with their swag-gering, belt-hitching names for themselves. Men, so proud of their muscles, their drinking capacities, their eating capacities; so everlastingly proud of their pricks. Yes, even in these times, when a good many of them could shoot nothing but strange, bent seed that produced children fit only to be drowned in the nearest well. Ah, but it was never their fault, was it, dear? No, always it was the woman—her womb, her fault. Men were such cow-ards. Such grinning cowards. These three had been no different from the general run. The old one with the limp might bear watching—aye, so he might, a clear and overly curious pair of eyes had looked out at her from his head—but she saw nothing in them she could not deal with, came it to that.

Men! She could not understand why so many women feared them. Hadn't the gods made them with the most vulnerable part of their guts hanging right out of their bodies, like a misplaced bit of bowel? Kick them there and they curled up like snails. Caress them there and their brains melted. Anyone who doubted that second bit of wisdom need only look at her night's second bit of business, the one which still lay ahead. Thorin! Mayor of Hambry! Chief Guard o' Barony! No fool like an old fool!

Yet none of these thoughts had any real power over her or any real malice to them, at least not now; the three men who called themselves the Big Coffin Hunters had

brought her a marvel, and she would look at it; aye, fill up her eyes with it, so she would.

The gimp, Jonas, had insisted she put it away—he had been told she had a place for such things, not that he wanted to see it himself, not *any* of her secret places, gods forbid (at this sally Depape and Reynolds had laughed like trolls)—and so she had, but the hoofbeats of their horses had been swallowed by the wind now, and she would do as she liked. The girl whose tits had stolen what little there was of Hart Thorin's mind would not be here for another hour, at least (the old woman had insisted that the girl walk from town, citing the purification value of such a moonlit heel-and-toe, actually just wanting to put a safe bumper of time between her two appointments), and during that hour she would do as she liked.

"Oh, it's beautiful, I'm sure 'tis," she whispered, and did she feel a certain heat in that place where her ancient bowlegs came together? A certain moisture in the dry creek which hid there? Gods!

"Aye, even through the box where they hid it I felt its glam. So beautiful, Musty, like you." She took the cat from her shoulder and held it in front of her eyes. The old torn purred and stretched out its pug of a face toward hers. She kissed its nose. The cat closed its milky gray-green eyes in ecstasy. "So beautiful, like you—so y'are, so y'are! Hee!"

She put the cat down. It walked slowly toward the hearth, where a late fire lazed, desultorily eating at a single log. Musty's tail, split at the tip so it looked like the forked tail of a devil in an old drawing, switched back and forth in the room's dim orange air. Its extra legs, dangling from its sides, twitched dreamily. The shadow which trailed across the floor and grew up the wall was a horror: a thing that looked like a cat crossed with a spider.

The old woman rose and went into her sleeping closet, where she had taken the thing Jonas had given her.

"Lose that and you'll lose your head," he'd said.

"Never fear me, my good friend," she'd replied, directing a cringing, servile smile back over her shoulder, all the while thinking: Men! Foolish strutting creatures they were!

Now she went to the foot of her bed, knelt, and passed one hand over the earth floor there. Lines appeared in the sour dirt as she did. They formed a square. She pushed her fingers into one of these lines; it gave before her touch. She lifted the

hidden panel (hidden in such a way that no one without the touch would ever be able to uncover it), revealing a compartment perhaps a foot square and two feet deep. Within it was an ironwood box. Curled atop the box was a slim green snake. When she touched its back, its head came up. Its mouth yawned in a silent hiss, displaying four pairs of fangs—two on top, two on the bottom.

She took the snake up, crooning to it. As she brought its flat face close to her own, its mouth yawned wider and its hissing became audible. She opened her own mouth; from between her wrinkled gray lips she poked the yellowish, bad-smelling mat of her tongue. Two drops of poison—enough to kill an entire dinner-party, if mixed in the punch—fell on it. She swallowed, feeling her mouth and throat and chest bum, as if with strong liquor. For a moment the room swam out of focus, and she could hear voices murmuring in the stenchy air of the hut—the voices of those she called "the unseen friends." Her eyes ran sticky water down the trenches time had drawn in her cheeks. Then she blew out a breath and the room steadied. The voices faded.

She kissed Ermot between his lidless eyes (*time o' the Kissing Moon, all right*, she thought) and then set him aside. The snake slipped beneath her bed, curled itself in a circle, and watched as she passed her palms over the top of the ironwood box. She could feel the muscles in her upper arms quivering, and that heat in her loins was more pronounced. Years it had been since she had felt the call of her sex, but she felt it now, so she did, and it was not the doing of the Kissing Moon, or not much.

The box was locked and Jonas had given her no key, but that was nothing to her, who had lived long and studied much and trafficked with creatures that most men, for all their bold talk and strutting ways, would run from as if on fire had they caught even the smallest glimpse of them. She stretched one hand toward the lock, on which was inlaid the shape of an eye and a motto in the High Speech (I see who opens me), and then withdrew it. All at once she could smell what her nose no longer noticed under ordinary circumstances: must and dust and a dirty mattress and the crumbs of food that had been consumed in bed; the mingled stench of ashes and ancient incense; the odor of an old woman with wet eyes and (ordinarily, at least) a dry pussy. She would not open this box and look at the wonder it contained in here; she would go outside, where the air was clean and the only smells were sage and mesquite.

She would look by the light of the Kissing Moon.

Rhea of Coos Hill pulled the box from its hole with a grunt, rose to her feet with another grunt (this one from her nether regions), tucked the box under her arm, and left the room.

## 2

The hut was far enough below the brow of the hill to block off the bitter-est gusts of the winter wind which blew almost constantly in these high-lands from Reaping until the end of Wide Earth. A path led to the hill's highest vantage; beneath the full moon it was a ditch of silver. The old woman toiled up it, puffing, her white hair standing out around her head in dirty clumps, her old dugs swaying from side to side under her black dress. The cat followed in her shadow, still giving off its rusty purr like a stink.

At the top of the hill, the wind lifted her hair away from her ravaged face and brought her the moaning whisper of the thinny which had eaten its way into the far end of Eyebolt Canyon. It was a sound few cared for, she knew, but she herself loved it; to Rhea of the Coos, it sounded like a lullaby. Overhead rode the moon, the shadows on its bright skin sketch-ing the faces of lovers kissing ... if you believed the ordinary fools be-low, that was. The ordinary fools below saw a different face or set of faces in each full moon, but the hag knew there was only one—the face of the Demon. The face of death.

She herself, however, had never felt more alive.

"Oh, my beauty," she whispered, and touched the lock with her gnarled fingers. A faint glimmer of red light showed between her bunched knuckles, and there was a click. Breathing hard, like a woman who has run a race, she put the box down and opened it.

Rose-colored light, dimmer than that thrown by the Kissing Moon but infinitely more beautiful, spilled out. It touched the ruined face hanging above the box, and for a moment made it the face of a young girl again.

Musty sniffed, head stretched forward, ears laid back, old eyes rimmed with that rose light. Rhea was instantly jealous.

"Get away, foolish, 'tis not for the likes of you!"

She swatted the cat. Musty shied back, hissing like a kettle, and stalked in



dudgeon to the hummock which marked the very tip of Coos Hill. There he sat, affecting disdain and licking one paw as the wind combed ceaselessly through his fur.

Within the box, peeping out of a velvet drawstring bag, was a glass globe. It was filled with that rosy light; it flowed in gentle pulses, like the beat of a satisfied heart.

"Oh, my lovely one," she murmured, lifting it out. She held it up before her; let its pulsing radiance run down her wrinkled face like rain. "Oh, ye live, so ye do!" Suddenly the color within the globe darkened toward scarlet. She felt it thrum in her hands like an immensely powerful motor, and again she felt that amazing wetness between her legs, that tidal tug she believed had been left behind long ago.

Then the thrumming died, and the light in the globe seemed to furl up like petals. Where it had been there was now a pinkish gloom . . . and three riders coming out of it. At first she thought it was the men who had brought her the globe—Jonas and the others. But no, these were younger, even younger than Depape, who was about twenty-five. The one on the left of the trio appeared to have a bird's skull mounted on the pommel of his saddle—strange but true.

Then that one and the one on the right were gone, darkened away somehow by the power of the glass, leaving only the one in the middle. She took in the jeans and boots he wore, the flat-brimmed hat that hid the upper half of his face, the easy way he sat his horse, and her first alarmed thought was *Gunslinger! Come east from the Inner Baronies, aye, perhaps from Gilead itself!* But she did not have to see the upper half of the rider's face to know he was little more than a child, and there were no guns on his hips. Yet she didn't think the youth came unarmed. If only she could see a little better . . .

She brought the glass almost to the tip of her nose and whispered, "Closer, lovie! Closer still!"

She didn't know what to expect—nothing at all seemed most likely—but within the dark circle of the glass, the figure did come closer. *Swum* closer, almost, like a horse and rider underwater, and she saw there was a quiver of arrows on his back. Before him, on the pommel of his saddle, was not a skull but a shortbow. And to the right side of the saddle, where a gunslinger might have carried a rifle in a scabbard, there was the feather-fluffed shaft of a lance. He was not one of the Old

People, his face had none of that look ... yet she did not think he was of the Outer Arc, either.

"But who *are* ye, cully?" she breathed. "And how shall I know ye? Ye've got yer hat pulled down so far I can't see your God-pounding *eyes*, so ye do! By yer horse, mayhap ... or p'raps by yer ... get away, Musty! Why do yer trouble me so? Arrrrr!" The cat had come back from its lookout point and was twining back and forth between her swollen old ankles, *waowing* up at her in a voice even more rusty than its purr. When the old woman kicked out at him, Musty dodged agilely away . . . then immediately came back and started in again, looking up at her with moonstruck eyes and making those soft yowls.

Rhea kicked out at it again, this one just as ineffectual as the first one, then looked into the glass once more. The horse and its interesting young rider were gone. The rose light was gone, as well. It was now just a dead glass ball she held, its only light a reflection borrowed from the moon.

The wind gusted, pressing her dress against the ruination that was her body. Musty, undaunted by the feeble kicks of his mistress, darted for-ward and began to twine about her ankles again, crying up at her the whole time.

"There, do ye see what you've done, ye nasty bag of fleas and dis-ease? The light's gone out of it, gone out just when I—"

Then she heard a sound from the cart track which led up to her hut, and understood why Musty had been acting out. It was singing she heard. It was the *girl* she heard. The girl was early.

Grimacing horribly—she loathed being caught by surprise, and the little miss down there would pay for doing it—she bent and put the glass back in its box. The inside was lined with padded silk, and the ball fit as neatly as the breakfast egg in His Lordship's cup. And still from down the hill (the cursed wind was wrong or she would have heard it sooner), the sound of the girl singing, now closer than ever:

*"Love, o love, o careless love.  
Can't you see what careless love has done?"*

"I'll give'ee careless love, ye virgin bitch," the old woman said. She could smell the sour reek of sweat from under her arms, but that other moisture had dried up

again. "I'll give ye payday for walking in early on old Rhea, so I will!" She passed her fingers over the lock on the front of the box, but it wouldn't fasten. She supposed she had been overeager to have it open, and had broken something inside it when she used the touch. The eye and the motto seemed to mock her: i see who opens me. It could be put right, and in a jiffy, but right now even a jiffy was more than she had.

"Pestering cunt!" She whined, lifting her head briefly toward the ap-proaching voice (almost here now, by the gods, and forty-five minutes be-fore her time!). Then she closed the lid of the box. It gave her a pang to do it, because the glass was coming to life again, filling with that rosy glow, but there was no time for looking or dreaming now. Later, perhaps, after the object of Thorin's unseemly late-life prickishness had gone.

*And you must restrain yourself from doing anything too awful to the girl, she cautioned herself. Remember she's here because of him, and at least ain't one of those green girls with a bun in the oven and a boyfriend acting reluctant about the cries o' marriage. It's Thorin 's doing, this one's what he thinks about after his ugly old crow of a wife is asleep and he takes himself in his hand and commences the evening milking; it's Thorin's doing, he has the old law on his side, and he has power. Further-more, what's in that box is his man's business, and if Jonas found out ye looked at it... that ye used it. ..*

Aye, but no fear of that. And in the meantime, possession were nine-tenths of the law, were it not?

She hoisted the box under one arm, hoisted her skirts with her free hand, and ran back along the path to the hut. She could still run when she had to, aye, though few there were who'd believe it.

Musty ran at her heels, bounding along with his cloven tail held high and his extra legs flopping up and down in the moonlight.

# CHAPTER II

## proving honesty

### 1

Rhea darted into her hut, crossed in front of the guttering fire, then stood in the doorway to her tiny bedroom, swiping a hand through her hair in a distracted gesture. The bitch hadn't seen her outside the hut—she surely would have stopped caterwauling, or at least faltered in it if she had—and that was good, but the cursed hidey-hole had sealed itself up again, and that was bad. There was no time to open it again, either. Rhea hurried to the bed, knelt, and pushed the box far back into the shadows beneath.

Ay, that would do; until Susy Greengown was gone, it would do very well. Smiling on the right side of her mouth (the left was mostly frozen), Rhea got up, brushed her dress, and went to meet her second appointment of the night.

### 2

Behind her, the unlocked lid of the box clicked open. It came up less than an inch, but that was enough to allow a sliver of pulsing rose-colored light to shine out.

### 3

Susan Delgado stopped about forty yards from the witch's hut, the sweat chilling on her arms and the nape of her neck. Had she just spied an old woman (surely the one she had come to see) dart down that last bit of path leading from the top of the hill? She thought she had.

*Don't stop singing—when an old lady hurries like that, she doesn't want to be seen. If you stop singing, she'll likely know she was.*

For a moment Susan thought she'd stop anyway—that her memory would close up like a startled hand and deny her another verse of the old song which she had been singing since youngest childhood. But the next verse came to her, and she

continued on (with feet as well as voice):

*"Once my cares were far away,  
Yes, once my cares were far away,  
Now my love has gone from me  
And misery is in my heart to stay."*

A bad song for a night such as this, mayhap, but her heart went its own way without much interest in what her head thought or wanted; al-ways had^ She was frightened to be out by moonlight, when werewolves were said to walk, she was frightened of her errand, and she was fright-ened by what that errand portended. Yet when she had gained the Great Road out of Hambry and her heart had demanded she run, she had run— under the light of the Kissing Moon and with her skirt held above her knees she had galloped like a pony, with her shadow galloping right be-side her. For a mile or more she had run, until every muscle in her body tingled and the air she pulled down her throat tasted like some sweet heated liquid. And when she reached the upland track leading to this high sinister, she had sung. Because her heart demanded it. And, she supposed, it really hadn't been such a bad idea; if nothing else, it had kept the worst of her megrims away. Singing was good for that much, anyway.

Now she walked to the end of the path, singing the chorus of "Care-less Love." As she stepped into the scant light which fell through the open door and onto the stoop, a harsh raincrow voice spoke from the shadows: "Stop yer howling, missy—it catches in my brains like a fishhook!"

Susan, who had been told all her life that she had a fair singing voice, a gift from her grandma, no doubt, fell silent at once, abashed. She stood on the stoop with her hands clasped in front of her apron. Beneath the apron she wore her second-best dress (she only had two). Beneath it, her heart was thumping very hard.

A cat—a hideous thing with two extra legs sticking out of its sides like toasting forks—came into the doorway first. It looked up at her, seemed to measure her, then screwed its face up in a look that was eerily human: contempt. It hissed at her, then flashed away into the night.

*Well, good evening to you, too,* Susan thought.

The old woman she had been sent to see stepped into the doorway.

She looked Susan up and down with that same expression of flat-eyed contempt, then stood back. "Come in. And mind ye clap the door tight. The wind has a way of blowin' it open, as ye see!"

Susan stepped inside. She didn't want to close herself into this bad-smelling room with the old woman, but when there was no choice, hesitation was ever a fault. So her father had said, whether the matter under discussion was sums and subtractions or how to deal with boys at barn-dances when their hands became overly adventurous. She pulled the door firmly to, and heard it latch.

"And here y'are," the old woman said, and offered a grotesque smile of welcome. It was a smile guaranteed to make even a brave girl think of stories told in the nursery—Winter's tales of old women with snaggle teeth and bubbling cauldrons full of toad-green liquid. There was no cauldron over the fire in this room (nor was the fire itself much of a shake, in Susan's opinion), but the girl guessed there had been, betimes, and things in it of which it might be better not to think. That this woman was a real witch and not just an old lady posing as one was something Susan had felt sure of from the moment she had seen Rhea darting back inside her hut with the malformed cat at her heels. It was something you could almost smell, like the reeky aroma rising off the hag's skin.

"Yes," she said, smiling. She tried to make it a good one, bright and unafraid.

"Here I am."

"And it's early y'are, my little sweeting. Early y'are! Hee!"

"I ran partway. The moon got into my blood, I suppose. That's what my da would have said."

The old woman's horrible smile widened into something that made Susan think of the way eels sometimes seemed to grin, after death and just before the pot. "Aye, but dead he is, dead these five years, Pat Delgado of the red hair and beard, the life mashed out of 'im by 'is own horse, aye, and went into the clearing at the end of the path with the music of his own snapping bones in his ears, so he did!"

The nervous smile slipped from Susan's face as if slapped away. She felt tears, always close at the mere mention of her da's name, bum at the back of her eyes. But she would not let them fall. Not in this heartless old crow's sight, she wouldn't. "Let our business be quick and be done," she said in a dry voice that was far from her usual one; that voice was usually cheery and merry and ready for fun. But she was Pat Delgado's child, daughter of the best drover ever to work the Western

Drop, and she remembered his face very well; she could rise to a stronger nature if required, as it now clearly was. The old woman had meant to reach out and scratch as deep as she could, and the more she saw that her efforts were succeeding, the more she would redouble them.

The hag, meanwhile, was watching Susan shrewdly, her bunch-knuckled hands planted on her hips while her cat twined around her ankles. Her eyes were rheumy, but Susan saw enough of them to realize they were the same gray-green shade as the cat's eyes, and to wonder what sort of fell magic that might be. She felt an urge—a strong one—to drop her eyes, and would not. It was all right to feel fear, but sometimes a very bad idea to show it.

"You look at me pert, missy," Rhea said at last. Her smile was dissolving slowly into a petulant frown.

"Nay, old mother," Susan replied evenly. "Only as one who wishes to do the business she came for and be gone. I have come here at the wish of My Lord Mayor of Mejis, and at that of my Aunt Cordelia, sister of my father. My *dear* father, of whom I would hear no ill spoken."

"I speak as I do," the old woman said. The words were dismissive, yet there was a trace of fawning servility in the hag's voice. Susan set no importance on that; it was a tone such a thing as this had probably adopted her whole life, and came as automatically as breath. "I've lived alone a long time, with no mistress but myself, and once it begins, my tongue goes where it will."

"Then sometimes it might be best not to let it begin at all."

The old woman's eyes flashed uglily. "Curb your own, stripling girl, lest you find it dead in your mouth, where it will rot and make the Mayor think twice about kissing you when he smells its stink, aye, even under such a moon as this!"

Susan's heart filled with misery and bewilderment. She'd come up here intent on only one thing: getting the business done as quickly as possible, a barely explained rite that was apt to be painful and sure to be shameful. Now this old woman was looking at her with flat and naked hatred. How could things have gone wrong with such suddenness? Or was it always this way with witches?

"We have begun badly, mistress—can we start over?" Susan asked suddenly, and held out her hand.

The hag looked startled, although she did reach out and make brief contact, the wrinkled tips of her fingers touching the short-nailed fingers of the sixteen-year-

old girl who stood before her with her clear-skinned face shining and her long hair braided down her back. Susan had to make a real effort not to grimace at the touch, brief as it was. The old woman's fingers were as chilly as those of a corpse, but Susan had touched chilly fingers before ("Cold hands, warm heart," Aunt Cord sometimes said). The real unpleasantness was in the *texture*, the feel of cold flesh spongy and loose on the bones, as if the woman to whom they were attached had drowned and lain long in some pool.

"Nay, nay, there's no starting over," the old woman said, "yet may-hap we'll go on better than we've begun. Ye've a powerful friend in the Mayor, and I'd not have him for my enemy."

*She's honest, at least*, Susan thought, then had to laugh at herself. This woman would be honest only when she absolutely had to be; left to her own devices and desires, she'd lie about everything—the weather, the crops, the flights of birds come Reaping.

"Ye came before I expected ye, and it's put me out of temper, so it has. Have ye brought me something, missy? Ye have, I'll warrant!" Her eyes were glittering once more, this time not with anger.

Susan reached beneath her apron (so stupid, wearing an apron for an errand on the backside of nowhere, but it was what custom demanded) and into her pocket. There, tied to a string so it could not be easily lost (by young girls suddenly moved to run in the moonlight, perchance), was a cloth bag. Susan broke the binding string and brought the bag out. She put it in the outstretched hand before her, the palm so worn that the lines marking it were now little more than ghosts. She was careful not to touch Rhea again ... although the old woman would be touching *her* again, and soon.

"Is it the sound o' the wind makes ye shiver?" Rhea asked, although Susan could tell her mind was mostly fixed on the little bag; her fingers were busy tugging out the knot in the drawstring.

"Yes, the wind."

"And so it should. 'Tis the voices of the dead you hear in the wind, and when they scream so, 'tis because they regret—ah!"

The knot gave. She loosened the drawstring and tumbled two gold coins into her hand. They were unevenly milled and crude—no one had made such for generations—but they were heavy, and the eagles engraved upon them had a



certain power. Rhea lifted one to her mouth, pulled back her lips to reveal a few gruesome teeth, and bit down. The hag looked at the faint indentations her teeth had left in the gold. For several seconds she gazed, rapt, then closed her fingers over them tightly.

While Rhea's attention was distracted by the coins, Susan happened to look through the open door to her left and into what she assumed was the witch's bedchamber. And here she saw an odd and disquieting thing: a light under the bed. A pink, pulsing light. It seemed to be coming from some kind of box, although she could not quite ...

The witch looked up, and Susan hastily moved her eyes to a corner of the room, where a net containing three or four strange white fruits hung from a hook. Then, as the old woman moved and her huge shadow danced ponderously away from that part of the wall, Susan saw they were not fruits at all, but skulls. She felt a sickish drop in her stomach.

"The fire needs building up, missy. Go round to the side of the house and bring back an armload of wood. Good-sized sticks are what's wanted, and never mind whining ye can't lug 'em. Ye're of a strappin' good size, so ye are!"

Susan, who had quit whining about chores around the time she had quit pissing into her clouts, said nothing . . . although it *did* cross her mind to ask Rhea if everyone who brought her gold was invited to lug her wood. In truth, she didn't mind; the air outside would taste like wine after the stench of the hut.

She had almost reached the door when her foot struck something hot and yielding. The cat yowled. Susan stumbled and almost fell. From behind her, the old woman issued a series of gasping, choking sounds which Susan eventually recognized as laughter.

"Watch Musty, my little sweet one! Tricksy, he is! And *tripsy* as well, betimes, so he is! Hee!" And off she went, in another gale.

The cat looked up at Susan, its ears laid back, its gray-green eyes wide. It hissed at her. And Susan, unaware she was going to do it until it was done, hissed back. Like its expression of contempt, Musty's look of surprise was eerily—and, in this case, comically—human. It turned and fled for Rhea's bedroom, its split tail lashing. Susan opened the door and went outside to get the wood. Already she felt as if she had been here a thousand years, and that it might be a thousand more before she could go home.

The air was as sweet as she had hoped, perhaps even sweeter, and for a moment she only stood on the stoop, breathing it in, trying to cleanse her lungs . . . and her mind.

After five good breaths, she got herself in motion. Around the side of the house she went... but it was the wrong side, it seemed, for there was no woodpile here. There was a narrow excuse for a window, however, half-buried in some tough and unlovely creeper. It was toward the back of the hut, and must look in on the old woman's sleeping closet.

*Don't look in there, whatever she's got under her bed isn't your business, and if she were to catch you. . .*

She went to the window despite these admonitions, and peeked in.

It was unlikely that Rhea would have seen Susan's face through the dense overgrowth of pig ivy even if the old besom had been looking in that direction, and she wasn't. She was on her knees, the drawstring bag caught in her teeth, reaching under the bed.

She brought out a box and opened its lid, which was already ajar. Her face was flooded with soft pink radiance, and Susan gasped. For one moment it was the face of a young girl—but one filled with cruelty as well as youth, the face of a self-willed child determined to learn all the wrong things for all the wrong reasons. The face of the girl this hag once had been, mayhap. The light appeared to be coming from some sort of glass ball.

The old woman looked at it for several moments, her eyes wide and fascinated. Her lips moved as if she were speaking to it or perhaps even singing to it; the little bag Susan had brought from town, its string still clamped in the hag's mouth, bobbed up and down as she spoke. Then, with what appeared to be great effort of will, she closed the box, cutting off the rosy light. Susan found herself relieved—there was something about it she didn't like.

The old woman cupped one hand over the silver lock in the middle of the lid, and a brief scarlet light spiked out from between her fingers. All this with the drawstring bag still hanging from her mouth. Then she put the box on the bed, knelt, and began running her hands over the dirt just beneath the bed's edge.

Although she touched only with her palms, lines appeared as if she had used a drawing tool. These lines darkened, becoming what looked like grooves.

*The wood, Susan! Get the wood before she wakes up to how long you've been gone! For your father's sake!*

Susan pulled the skirt of her dress all the way up to her waist—she did not want the old woman to see dirt or leaves on her clothing when she came back inside, did not want to answer the questions the sight of such smuts might provoke—and crawled beneath the window with her white cotton drawers flashing in the moonlight. Once she was past, she got to her feet again and hurried quietly around to the far side of the hut. Here she found the woodpile under an old, moldy-smelling hide. She took half a dozen good-sized chunks and walked back toward the front of the house with them in her arms.

When she entered, turning sideways to get her load through the doorway without dropping any, the old woman was back in the main room, staring moodily into the fireplace, where there was now little more than embers; Of the drawstring bag there was no sign.

"Took; you long enough, missy," Rhea said. She continued to look into the fireplace, as if Susan were of no account... but one foot tapped below the dirty hem of her dress, and her eyebrows were drawn together.

Susan crossed the room, peering over the load of wood in her arms as well as she could while she walked. It wouldn't surprise her a bit to spy the cat lurking near, hoping to trip her up. "I saw a spider," she said. "I flapped my apron at it to make it run away. I hate the look of them, so I do."

"Ye'll see something ye like the look of even less, soon enough," Rhea said, grinning her peculiar one-sided grin. "Out of old Thorin's nightshirt it'll come, stiff as a stick and as red as rhubarb! Hee! Hold a minute, girl; ye gods, ye've brought enough for a Fair-Day bonfire."

Rhea took two fat logs from Susan's pile and tossed them indifferently onto the coals. Embers spiraled up the dark and faintly roaring shaft of the chimney. *There, ye've scattered what's left of yer fire, ye silly old thing, and will likely have to rekindle the whole mess,* Susan thought. Then Rhea reached into the fireplace with one splayed hand, spoke a guttural word, and the logs blazed up as if soaked in oil.

"Put the rest over there," she said, pointing at the woodbox. "And mind ye not be a

scatterbark, missy."

*What, and dirty all this neat?* Susan thought. She bit the insides of her cheeks to kill the smile that wanted to rise on her mouth.

Rhea might have sensed it, however; when Susan straightened again, the old woman was looking at her with a dour, knowing expression.

"All right, mistress, let's do our business and have it done. Do ye know why you're here?"

"I am here at Mayor Thorin's wish," Susan repeated, knowing that was no real answer. She was frightened now—more frightened than when she had looked through the window and seen the old woman crooning to the glass ball. "His wife has come barren to the end of her courses. He wishes to have a son before he is also unable to—"

"Pish-tush, spare me the codswallop and pretty words. He wants tits and arse that don't squish in his hands and a box that'll grip what he pushes. If he's still man enough to push it, that is. If a son come of it, aye, fine, he'll give it over to ye to keep and raise until it's old enough to school, and after that ye'll see it no more. If it's a daughter, he'll likely take it from ye and give it to his new man, the one with the girl's hair and the limp, to drown in the nearest cattle-wallow."

Susan stared at her, shocked out of all measure.

The old woman saw the look and laughed. "Don't like the sound of the truth, do yer? Few do, missy. But that's neither here nor there; yer auntie was ever a trig one, and she'll have done all right out of Thorin and Thorin's treasury. What *gold* you see of it's none o' mine . . . and won't be none o' yours, either, if you don't watch sharp! Hee! Take off that dress!"

*I won't* was what rose to her lips, but what then? To be turned out of this hut (and to be turned out pretty much as she had come, and not as a lizard or a hopping toad would probably be the best luck she could hope for) and sent west as she was now, without even the two gold coins she'd brought up here? And that was only the small half of it. The large was that she had given her word. At first she had resisted, but when Aunt Cord had invoked her father's name, she had given in. As she always did. Really, she had no choice." And when there was no choice, hesitation was ever a fault.

She brushed the front of her apron, to which small bits of bark now clung, then untied it and took it off. She folded it, laid it on a small, grimy hassock near the

hearth, and unbuttoned her dress to the waist. She shivered it from her shoulders, and stepped out. She folded it and laid it atop the apron, trying not to mind the greedy way Rhea of Coos was staring at her in the firelight. The cat came sashaying across the floor, grotesque extra legs hobbling, and sat at Rhea's feet. Outside, the wind gusted. It was warm on the hearth but Susan was cold just the same, as if that wind had gotten inside her, somehow.

"Hurry, girl, for yer father's sake!"

Susan pulled her shift over her head, folded it atop the dress, then stood in only her drawers, with her arms folded over her bosom. The fire painted warm orange highlights along her thighs; black circles of shadow in the tender folds behind her knees.

"And still she's not nekkid!" the old crow laughed. "Ain't we lah-di-dah! Aye, we are, very fine! Take off those drawers, mistress, and stand as ye slid from yer mother! Although ye had not so many goodies as to interest the likes of Hart Thorin then, did ye? Hee!"

Feeling caught in a nightmare, Susan did as she was bid. With her mound and bush uncovered, her crossed arms seemed foolish. She lowered them to her sides.

"Ah, no wonder he wants ye!" the old woman said. "Tis beautiful ye are, and true! Is she not, Musty?"

The cat *waowed*.

"*There's* dirt on yer knees," Rhea said suddenly. "How came it there?" \ Susan felt a moment of awful panic. She had lifted her skirts to crawl beneath the hag's window . . . and hung herself by doing it.

Then an answer rose to her lips, and she spoke it calmly enough. "When I came in sight of your hut, I grew fearful. I knelt to pray, and raised my skirt so as not to soil it."

"I'm touched—to want a clean dress for the likes o' me! How good y'are! Don't you agree, Musty?"

The cat *waowed*, then began to lick one of its forepaws.

"Get on with it," Susan said. "You've been paid and I'll obey, but stop teasing and have done."

"You know what it is I have to do, mistress."

"I *don't*," Susan said. The tears were close again, burning the backs of her eyes, but she would not let them fall. *Would not*. "I have an idea, but when I asked Aunt

Cord if I was right, she said that you'd 'take care of my education in that regard.' "

"Wouldn't dirty her mouth with the words, would she? Well, that's all right. Yer Aunt Rhea's not too nice to say what yer Aunt Cordelia won't. I'm to make sure that ye're physically and spiritually intact, missy.

Proving honesty is what the old ones called it, and it's a good enough name. So it is. Step to me."

Susan took two reluctant steps forward, so that her bare toes were almost touching the old woman's slippers and her bare breasts were almost touching the old woman's dress.

"If a devil or demon has polluted yer spirit, such a thing as might taint the child you'll likely bear, it leaves a mark behind. Most often it's a suck-mark or a lover's bite, but there's others . . . open yer mouth!"

Susan did, and when the old woman bent closer, the reek of her was so strong that the girl's stomach clenched. She held her breath, praying this would be over soon.

"Run out yer tongue."

Susan ran out her tongue.

"Now send yer breezes into my face."

Susan exhaled her held breath. Rhea breathed it in and then, merci-fully, pulled her head away a little. She had been close enough for Susan to see the lice hopping in her hair.

"Sweet enough," the old woman said. "Aye, good's a meal. Now turn around."

Susan did, and felt the old witch's fingers trail down her back and to her buttocks. Their tips were cold as mud.

"Bend over and spread yer cheeks, missy, be not shy, Rhea's seen more than one pultry in her time!"

Face flushing—she could feel the beat of her heart in the center of her forehead and in the hollows of her temples—Susan did as told. And then she felt one of those corpselike fingers prod its way into her anus. Susan bit her lips to keep from screaming.

The invasion was mercifully short ... but there would be another, Susan feared.

"Turn around."

She turned. The old woman passed her hands over Susan's breasts, flicked lightly at the nipples with her thumbs, then examined the under-sides carefully. Rhea slipped a finger into the cup of the girl's navel, then hitched up her own skirt and

dropped to her knees with a grunt of effort. She passed her hands down Susan's legs, first front, then back. She seemed to take special pains with the area just below the calves, where the ten-dons ran.

"Lift yer right foot, girl."

Susan did, and uttered a nervous, screamy laugh as Rhea ran a thumb-nail down her instep to her heel. The old woman parted her toes, looking between each pair. After this process had been repeated with the other foot, the old woman—still on her knees—said: "You know what comes next."

"Aye." The word came out of her in a little trembling rush.

"Hold ye still, missy—all else is well, clean as a willow-strip, ye are, but now we've come to the cozy nook that's all Thorin cares for; we've come to where honesty must really be proved. So hold ye still!"

Susan closed her eyes and thought of horses running along the Drop—nominally they were the Barony's horse, overlooked by Rimer, Thorin's Chancellor and the Barony's Minister of Inventory, but the horses didn't know that; they thought they were free, and if you were free in your mind, what else mattered?

*Let me be free in my mind, as free as the horses along the Drop, and don't let her hurt me. Please, don't let her hurt me. And if she does, please help me to bear it in decent silence.*

Cold fingers parted the downy hair below her navel; there was a pause, and then two cold fingers slipped inside her. There *was* pain, but only a moment of it, and not bad; she'd hurt herself worse stubbing her toe or barking her shin on the way to the privy in the middle of the night. The humiliation was the bad part, and the revulsion of Rhea's ancient touch.

"Caulked tight, ye are!" Rhea cried. "Good as ever was! But Thorin'll see to that, so he will! As for you, my girl, I'll tell yer a secret yer prissy aunt with her long nose 'n tight purse 'n little goosebump tits never knew: even a girl who's intact don't need to lack for a shiver now 'n then, if she knows how!"

The hag's withdrawing fingers closed gently around the little nubbin of flesh at the head of Susan's cleft. For one terrible second Susan thought they would pinch that sensitive place, which sometimes made her draw in a breath if it rubbed just so against the pommel of her saddle when she was riding, but instead the fingers caressed . . . then pressed ... and the girl was horrified to feel a heat which was far from unpleasant kindle in her belly.

"Like a little bud o' silk," the old woman crooned, and her meddling fingers moved faster. Susan felt her hips sway forward, as if with a mind and life of their own, and then she thought of the old woman's greedy, self-willed face, pink as the face of a whore by gaslight as it hung over the open box; she thought of the way the drawstring bag with the gold pieces in it had hung from the wrinkled mouth like some disgorged piece of flesh, and the heat she felt was gone. She drew back, trembling, her arms and belly and breasts breaking out in gooseflesh.

"You've finished what you were paid to do," Susan said. Her voice was dry and harsh.

Rhea's face knotted. "Ye'll not tell me aye, no, yes, or maybe, impudent stripling of a girl! I know when I'm done, I, Rhea, the Weirding of Coos, and—"

"Be still, and be on your feet before I kick you into the fire, unnatural thing."

The old woman's lips wriggled back from her few remaining teeth in a doglike sneer, and now, Susan realized, she and the witch-woman were back where they had been at the start: ready to claw each other's eyes out.

"Raise hand or foot to me, you impudent cunt, and what leaves my house will leave handless, footless, and blind of eye."

"I do not much doubt you could do it, but Thorin should be vexed," Susan said. It was the first time in her life she had ever invoked a man's name for protection. Realizing this made her feel ashamed . . . small, somehow. She didn't know why that should be, especially since she had agreed to sleep in his bed and bear his child, but it was.

The old woman stared, her seamed face working until it folded into a parody of a smile that was worse than her snarl. Puffing and pulling at the arm of her chair, Rhea got to her feet. As she did, Susan quickly began to dress.

"Aye, vexed he would be. Perhaps you know best after all, missy; I've had a strange night, and it's wakened parts of me better left asleep. Anything else that might have happened, take it as a compliment to yer youth'n purity . . . and to yer beauty as well. Aye. You're a beautiful thing, and there's no doubt in it. Yer hair, now . . . when yer let it down, as ye will for Thorin, I wot, when ye lay with him . . . it glows like the sun, doesn't it?"

Susan did not want to force the old hag out of her posturing, but she didn't want to encourage these fawning compliments, either. Not when she could still see the hate in Rhea's rheumy eyes, not when she could feel the old woman's touch still



crawling like beetles on her skin. She said nothing, only stepped into her dress, set it on her shoulders, and began to button up the front.

Rhea perhaps understood the run of her thoughts, for the smile dropped off her mouth and her manner grew businesslike. Susan found this a great relief.

"Well, never mind it. Ye've proved honest; ye may dress yerself and go. But not a word of what passed between us to Thorin, mind ye! Words between women need trouble no man's ear, especially one as great as he." Yet at this Rhea could not forbear a certain spasming sneer. Susan didn't know if the old woman was aware of it or not. "Are we agreed?"

*Anything, anything, just as long as I can be out of here and away.*

"You declare me proved?"

"Aye, Susan, daughter of Patrick. So I do. But it's not what I *say* that matters. Now ... wait... somewhere here ..."

She scabbled along the mantel, pushing stubs of candles stuck on cracked saucers this way and that, lifting first a kerosene lantern and then a battery flashlight, looking fixedly for a moment at a drawing of a young boy and then putting it aside.

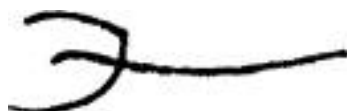
"Where . . . where . . . *arrrrrr*.. . here!"

She snatched up a pad of paper with a sooty cover (citgo stamped on it in ancient gold letters) and a stub of pencil. She paged almost to the end of the pad before finding a blank sheet. On it she scrawled something, then tore the sheet off the spiral of wire at the top of the pad. She held the sheet out to Susan, who took it and looked at it. Scrawled there was a word she did not understand at first:



onkest

Below it was a symbol:



"What's this?" she asked, tapping the little drawing. "Rhea, her mark. Known for six Baronies around, it is, and can't be copied. Show that paper to yer aunt. Then to Thorin. If yer aunt wants to take it and show it to Thorin herself—I know her, y'see, and her bossy ways—tell her no, Rhea says no, she's not to have the keeping of it." "And if Thorin wants it?"

Rhea shrugged dismissively. "Let him keep it or bum it or wipe his bum with it, for all of me. It's nothing to you, either, for you knew you were honest all along, so you did. True?"

Susan nodded. Once, walking home after a dance, she had let a boy slip his hand inside her shirt for a moment or two, but what of that? She was honest. And in more ways than this nasty creature meant.

"But don't lose that paper. Unless you'd see me again, that is, and go through the same business a second time."

*Gods perish even the thought*, Susan thought, and managed not to shudder. She put the paper in her pocket, where the drawstring bag had been.

"Now, come to the door, missy." She looked as if she wanted to grasp Susan's arm, then thought better of it. The two of them walked side by side to the door, not touching in such a careful way that it made them look awkward. Once there, Rhea did grip Susan's arm. Then, with her other hand, she pointed to the bright silver disc hanging over the top of the Coos.

"The Kissing Moon," Rhea said. " 'Tis midsummer."

"Yes."

"Tell Thorin he's not to have you in his bed—or in a haystack, or on the scullery floor, or anywhere else—until Demon Moon rises full in the sky."

"Not until Reaping?" That was three months—a lifetime, it seemed to her. Susan tried not to show her delight at this reprieve. She'd thought Thorin would put an end to her virginity by moonrise the next night. She wasn't blind to the way he looked at her.

Rhea, meanwhile, was looking at the moon, seeming to calculate. Her hand went to the long tail of Susan's hair and stroked it. Susan bore this as well as she could, and just when she felt she could bear it no longer, Rhea dropped her hand back to her side and nodded. "Aye, not just Reaping, but *true fin de ano*—Fair-Night, tell him. Say that he may have you after the bonfire. You understand?"

"*True fin de ano*, yes." She could barely contain her joy.

"When the fire in Green Heart bums low and the last of the red-handed men are ashes," Rhea said. "Then and not *until* then. You must tell him so."

"I will."

The hand came out and began to stroke her hair again. Susan bore it.

After such good news, she thought, it would have been mean-spirited to do otherwise. "The time between now and Reaping you will use to medi-tate, and to gather your forces to produce the male child the Mayor wants ... or mayhap just to ride along the Drop and gather the last flowers of your maidenhood. Do you understand?"

"Yes." She dropped a curtsey. "Thankee-sai."

Rhea waved this off as if it were a flattery. "Speak not of what passed between us, mind. 'Tis no one's affair but our own."

"I won't. And our business is done?"

"Well ... mayhap there's one more *small* thing ..." Rhea smiled to show it was indeed small, then raised her left hand in front of Susan's eyes with three fingers together and one apart. Glimmering in the fork be-tween was a silver medallion, seemingly produced from nowhere. The girl's eyes fastened on it at once. Until Rhea spoke a single guttural word, that was.

Then they closed.

## 5

Rhea looked at the girl who stood asleep on her stoop in the moonlight. As she replaced the medallion within her sleeve (her fingers were old and bunched, but they moved dexterously enough when it was required, oh, aye), the businesslike expression fell from her face, and was replaced by a look of squint-eyed fury. *Kick me into the fire, would you, you trull? Tat-tle to Thorin?* But her threats and impudence weren't the worst. The worst had been the expression of revulsion on her face when she had pulled back from Rhea's touch.

Too good for Rhea, she was! And thought herself too good for Thorin as well, no doubt, she with sixteen years' worth of fine blonde hair hang-ing down from her head, hair Thorin no doubt dreamed of plunging his hands into even as he plunged and reared and plowed down below.

She couldn't hurt the girl, much as she wanted to and much as the girl deserved it;

if nothing else, Thorin might take the glass ball away from her, and Rhea couldn't bear that. Not yet, anyway. So she could not hurt the girl, but she *could* do something that would spoil his pleasure in her, at least for awhile.

Rhea leaned close to the girl, grasped the long braid which lay down her back, and began to slip it through her fist, enjoying its silky smoothness.

"Susan," she whispered. "Do'ee hear me, Susan, daughter of Patrick?"

"Yes." The eyes did not open.

"Then listen." The light of the Kissing Moon fell on Rhea's face and turned it into a silver skull. "Listen to me well, and remember. Remember in the deep cave where yer waking mind never goes."

She pulled the braid through her hand again and again. Silky and smooth. Like the little bud between her legs.

"Remember," the girl in the doorway said.

"Aye. There's something ye'll do after he takes yer virginity. Ye'll do it right away, without even thinking about it. Now listen to me, Susan, daughter of Patrick, and hear me very well."

Still stroking the girl's hair, Rhea put her wrinkled lips to the smooth cup of Susan's ear and whispered in the moonlight.

## CHAPTER III

### A MEETING ON THE ROAD

She had never in her life had such a strange night, and it was probably not surprising that she didn't hear the rider approaching from behind until he was almost upon her.

The thing that troubled her most as she made her way back toward town was her new understanding of the compact she had made. It was good to have a reprieve—months yet before she would have to live up to her end of the bargain—but a reprieve didn't change the basic fact: when the Demon Moon was full, she would lose her virginity to Mayor Thorin, a skinny, twitchy man with fluffy white hair rising like a cloud around the bald spot on top of his head. A man whose wife regarded him with a certain weary sadness that was painful to look at. Hart Thorin was a man who laughed uproariously when a company of players put on an entertainment involving head-knocking or pretend punching or rotten fruit-throwing, but who only looked puzzled at a story which was pathetic or tragical. A knuckle-cracker, a back-slapper, a dinner-table belcher, a man who had a way of looking anxiously toward his Chancellor at almost every other word, as if to make sure he hadn't offended Rimer in some way.

Susan had observed all these things often; her father had for years been in charge of the Barony's horse and had gone to Seafront often on business. Many times he had taken his much loved daughter with him. Oh, she had seen a lot of Hart Thorin over the years, and he had seen a lot of her, as well. Too much, mayhap! For what now seemed the most important fact about him was that he was almost fifty years older than the girl who would perhaps bear his son.

She had made the bargain lightly enough—

No, not lightly, that was being unfair to herself... but she had lost little sleep over it, that much was true. She had thought, after listening to all Aunt Cord's arguments: *Well, it's little enough, really, to have the indenture off the lands; to finally own our little piece of the Drop in fact as well as in tradition . . . to actually have papers, one in our house and one in Rimer's files, saying it's ours. Aye, and to have horses again. Only three, 'tis true, but that's three more than we have now. And against that? To lie with him a time or two, and to bear a child, which millions of women have done before me with no harm. 'Tis not, after all, a mutant or a leper I'm being asked to partner with but just an old man with noisy knuckles. 'Tis not forever, and, as Aunt Cord says, I may still marry, if time and ka decree; I should not be the first woman to come to her husband's bed as a mother. And*

*does it make me a whore to do such? The law says not, but never mind that; my heart's law is what matters, and my heart says that if I may gain the land that was my da's and three horses to run on it by being such, then it's a whore I'll be.*

There was something else: Aunt Cord had capitalized—rather ruth-lessly, Susan now saw—on a child's innocence. It was the *baby* Aunt Cord had harped on, *the cunning little baby* she would have. Aunt Cord had known that Susan, the dolls of her childhood put aside not all that long ago, would love the idea of her own baby, a little living doll to dress and feed and sleep with in the heat of the afternoon.

What Cordelia had ignored (*perhaps she's too innocent even to have considered it*, Susan thought, but didn't quite believe) was what the hag-woman had made brutally clear to her this evening: Thorin wanted more than a child.

*He wants tits and arse that don't squish in his hands and a box that 'll grip what he pushes.*

Just thinking of those words made her face throb as she walked through the post-moonset dark toward town (no high-spirited running this time; no singing, either). She had agreed with vague thoughts of how managed livestock mated—they were allowed to go at it "until the seed took," then separated again. But now she knew that Thorin might want her again and again, probably *would* want her again and again, and com-mon law going back like iron for two hundred generations said that he could continue to lie with her until she who had proved the consort honest should prove her honestly with child as well, and that child honest in and of itself . . . not, that was, a mutant aberration. Susan had made discreet enquiries and knew that this second proving usually came around the fourth month of pregnancy . . . around the time she would begin to show, even with her clothes on. It would be up to Rhea to make the judgment... and Rhea didn't like her.

Now that it was too late—now that she had accepted the compact for-mally tendered by the Chancellor, now that she had been proved honest by yon strange bitch—she rued the bargain. Mostly what she thought of was how Thorin would look with his pants off, his legs white and skinny, like the legs of a stork, and how, as they lay together, she would hear his long bones crackling: knees and back and elbows and neck.

*And knuckles. Don't forget his knuckles.*

Yes. Big old man's knuckles with hair growing out of them. Susan chuckled at the thought, it was that comical, but at the same time a warm tear ran unnoticed from

the corner of one eye and tracked down her cheek. She wiped it away without knowing it, any more than she heard the clip-clip of approaching hoofs in the soft road-dust. Her mind was still far away, returning to the odd thing she had seen through the old woman's bedroom window—the soft but somehow unpleasant light coming from the pink globe, the hypnotized way the hag had been looking down at it...

When Susan at last heard the approaching horse, her first alarmed thought was that she must get into the copse of trees she was currently passing and hide. The chances of anyone aboveboard being on the road this late seemed small to her, especially now that such bad times had come to Mid-World—but it was too late for that.

The ditch, then, and sprawled flat. With the moon down, there was at least a chance that whoever it was would pass without—

But before she could even begin in that direction, the rider who had sneaked up behind her while she was thinking her long and rueful thoughts had hailed her.

"Goodeven, lady, and may your days be long upon the earth."

She turned, thinking: *What if it's one of the new men always lounging about Mayor's House or in the Travellers' Rest? Not the oldest one, the voice isn't wavery like his, but maybe one of the others . . . it could be the one they call Depape...*

"Goodeven," she heard herself saying to the man shape on the tall horse. "May yours be long also."

Her voice didn't tremble, not that she could hear. She didn't think it was Depape, or the one named Reynolds, either. The only thing she could tell about the fellow for sure was that he wore a flat-brimmed hat, the sort she associated with men of the Inner Baronies, back when travel between east and west had been more common than it was now. Back before John Farson came—the Good Man—and the bloodletting began.

As the stranger came up beside her, she forgave herself a little for not hearing him approach—there was no buckle or bell on his gear that she could see, and everything was tied down so as not to snap or flap. It was almost the rig of an outlaw or a harrier (she had the idea that Jonas, he of the wavery voice, and his two friends might have been both, in other times and other climes) or even a gunslinger. But this man bore no guns, unless they were hidden. A bow on the

pommel of his saddle and what looked like a lance in a scabbard, that was all. And there had never, she reckoned, been a gunslinger as young as this.

He clucked sidemouth at the horse just as her da had always done (and she herself, of course), and it stopped at once. As he swung one leg over his saddle, lifting it high and with unconscious grace, Susan said:

"Nay, nay, don't trouble yerself, stranger, but go as ye would!"

If he heard the alarm in her voice, he paid no heed to it. He slipped off the horse, not bothering with the tied-down stirrup, and landed neatly in front of her, the dust of the road puffing about his square-toed boots. By starlight she saw that he was young indeed, close to her own age on one side or the other. His clothes were those of a working cowboy, al-though new.

"Will Dearborn, at your service," he said, then doffed his hat, extended a foot on one bootheel, and bowed as they did in the Inner Baronies.

Such absurd courtliness out here in the middle of nowhere, with the acrid smell of the oil patch on the edge of town already in her nostrils, startled her out of her fear and into a laugh. She thought it would likely offend him, but he smiled instead. A good smile, honest and artless, its inner part lined with even teeth.

She dropped him a little curtesy, holding out one side of her dress. "Susan Delgado, at yours."

He tapped his throat thrice with his right hand. "Thankee-sai, Susan Delgado. We're well met, I hope. I didn't mean to startle you—"

"Ye did, a little."

"Yes, I thought I had. I'm sorry."

*Yes.* Not *aye* but *yes*. A young man, from the Inner Baronies, by the sound. She looked at him with new interest.

"Nay, ye need not apologize, for I was deep in my own thoughts," she said. "I'd been to see a ... friend ... and hadn't realized how much time had passed until I saw the moon was down. If ye stopped out of concern, I thankee, stranger, but ye may be on yer way as I would be on mine. It's only to the edge of the village I go—Hambry. It's close, now."

"Pretty speech and lovely sentiments," he answered with a grin, "but it's late, you're alone, and I think we may as well pass on together. Do you ride, sai?"

"Yes, but really—"

"Step over and meet my friend Rusher, then. He shall carry you the last two miles.



He's gelded, sai, and gentle."

She looked at Will Dearborn with a mixture of amusement and irritation. The thought which crossed her mind was *If he calls me sai again, as though I were a schoolteacher or his dodderly old great aunt, I'm going to take off this stupid apron and swat him with it.* "I never minded a bit of temper in a horse docile enough to wear a saddle. Until his death, my father managed the Mayor's horses ... and the Mayor in these parts is also Guard o' Barony. I've ridden my whole life."

She thought he might apologize, perhaps even stutter, but he only nodded with a calm thoughtfulness that she rather liked. "Then step to the stirrup, my lady. I'll walk beside and trouble you with no conversation, if you'd rather not have it. It's late, and talk palls after moonset, some say."

She shook her head, softening her refusal with a smile. "Nay. I thank ye for yer kindness, but it would not be well, mayhap, for me to be seen riding a strange young man's horse at eleven o' the clock. Lemon-juice won't take the stain out of a lady's reputation the way it will out of a shirt-waist, you know."

"There's no one out here to see you," the young man said in a mad-deningly reasonable voice. "And that you're tired, I can tell. Come, sai—"

"Please don't call me that. It makes me feel as ancient as a . . ." She hesitated for a brief moment, rethinking the word

*(witch)*

that first came to her mind. ". . . as an old woman."

"Miss Delgado, then. Are you sure you won't ride?"

"Sure as can be. I'd not ride cross-saddle in a dress in any case, Mr. Dearborn—not even if you were my own brother. 'Twouldn't be proper."

He stood in the stirrup himself, reached over to the far side of his saddle (Rusher stood docilely enough at this, only flicking his ears, which Susan would have been happy to flick herself had she been Rusher—they were that beautiful), and stepped back down with a rolled garment in his hands. It was tied with a rawhide hank.

She thought it was a poncho.

"You may spread this over your lap and legs like a duster," he said. "There's quite enough of it for decorum's sake—it was my father's, and he's taller than me." He looked off toward the western hills for a moment, and she saw he was handsome, in a hard sort of way that jagged against his youth. She felt a little shiver inside her, and wished for the thousandth time that the foul old woman had kept her

hands strictly on her business, as unpleasant as that business had been. Susan didn't want to look at this handsome stranger and remember Rhea's touch.

"Nay," she said gently. "Thankee again, I recognize yer kindness, but I must refuse."

"Then I'll walk along beside, and Rusher'll be our chaperone," he said cheerfully. "As far as the edge of town, at least, there'll be no eyes to see and think ill of a perfectly proper young woman and a more-or-less proper young man. And once there, I'll tip my hat and wish you a very good night."

"I wish ye wouldn't. Really." She brushed a hand across her fore-head. "Easy for you to say there are no eyes to see, but sometimes there are eyes even where there shouldn't be. And my position is ... a little delicate just now."

"I'll walk with you, however," he repeated, and now his face was somber. "These are not good times. Miss Delgado. Here in Mejis you are far from the worst of the troubles, but sometimes trouble reaches out."

She opened her mouth—to protest again, she supposed, perhaps to tell him that Pat Delgado's daughter could take care of herself—and then she thought of the Mayor's new men, and the cold way they had run their eyes over her when Thorin's attention had been elsewhere. She had seen those three this very night as she left on her way to the witch's hut. Them she *had* heard approaching, and in plenty of time for her to leave the road and rest behind a handy *pinon* tree (she refused to think of it as hiding, ex-actly). Back toward town they had gone, and she supposed they were drinking at the Travellers' Rest right now—and would continue to until Stanley Ruiz closed the bar—but she had no way of knowing that for sure. They could come back.

"If I can't dissuade ye, very well," she said, sighing with a vexed res-ignation she didn't really feel. "But only to the first mailbox—Mrs. Beech's. That marks the edge of town."

He tapped his throat again, and made another of those absurd, en-chanting bows—foot stuck out as if he would trip someone, heel planted in the dirt.

"Thankee, Miss Delgado!"

*At least he didn't 't call me sai, she thought. That's a start.*



## 2

She thought he'd chatter away like a magpie in spite of his promise to be silent, because that was what boys did around her—she was not vain of her looks, but she thought she *was* good-looking, if only because the boys could not shut up or stop shuffling their feet when they were around her. And this one would be full of questions the town boys didn't need to ask—how old was she, had she always lived in Hambry, were her parents alive, half a hundred others just as boring—but they would all circle in on the same one: did she have a steady fellow? But Will Dearborn of the Inner Baronies didn't ask her about her schooling or

family or friends (the most common way of approaching any romantic rivals, she had found). Will Dearborn simply walked along beside her, one hand wrapped around Rusher's bridle, looking off east toward the Clean Sea. They were close enough to it now so that the teary smell of salt mingled with the tarry stench of oil, even though the wind was from the south.

They were passing Citgo now, and she was glad for Will Dearborn's presence, even if his silence was a little irritating. She had always found the oil patch, with its skeletal forest of gantries, a little spooky. Most of those steel towers had stopped pumping long since, and there was neither the parts, the need, nor the understanding to repair them. And those which did still labor along—nineteen out of about two hundred—could not be stopped. They just pumped and pumped, the supplies of oil beneath them seemingly inexhaustible. A little was still used, but a very little—most simply ran back down into the wells beneath the dead pumping stations. The world had moved on, and this place reminded her of a strange mechanical graveyard where some of the corpses hadn't quite—

Something cold and smooth nuzzled the small of her back, and she wasn't quite able to stifle a little shriek. Will Dearborn wheeled toward her, his hands dropping toward his belt. Then he relaxed and smiled.

"Rusher's way of saying he feels ignored. I'm sorry, Miss Delgado."

She looked at the horse. Rusher looked back mildly, then dipped his head as if to say he was also sorry for having startled her.

*Foolishness, girl*, she thought, hearing the hearty, no-nonsense voice of her father. *He wants to know why you 're being so standoffy, that's all. And so do I. 'Tisn't like you, so it's not.*

"Mr. Dearborn, I've changed my mind," she said. "I'd like to ride."

### 3

He turned his back and stood looking out at Citgo with his hands in his pockets while Susan first laid the poncho over the cantle of the saddle (the plain black saddle of a working cowboy, without a Barony brand or even a ranch brand to mark it), and then mounted into the stirrup. She lifted her skirt and glanced around sharply, sure he would be stealing a peek, but his back was still to her. He seemed fascinated with the rusty oil derricks.

*What's so interesting about them, cully?* she thought, a trifle crossly—it was the lateness of the hour and the residue of her stirred-up emotions, she supposed. *Filthy old things have been there six centuries and more, and I've been smelling their stink my whole life.*

"Stand easy now, my boy," she said once she had her foot fixed in the stirrup. One hand held the top of the saddle's pommel, the other the reins. Rusher, meanwhile, flicked his ears as if to say he would stand easy all night, were that what she required.

She swung up, one long bare thigh flashing in the starlight, and felt the exhilaration of being horsed that she always felt . . . only tonight it seemed a little stronger, a little sweeter, a little sharper. Perhaps because the horse was such a beauty, perhaps because the horse was a stranger . . .

*Perhaps because the horse's owner is a stranger,* she thought, *and fair.*

That was nonsense, of course . . . and potentially dangerous nonsense. Yet it was also true. He *was* fair.

As she opened the poncho and spread it over her legs, Dearborn began to whistle. And she realized, with a mixture of surprise and superstitious fear, what the tune was: "Careless Love." The very lay she had been singing on her way up to Rhea's hut.

*Mayhap it's ka, girl,* her father's voice whispered.

*No such thing,* she thought right back at him. *I'll not see ka in every passing wind and shadow, like the old ladies who gather in Green Heart of a summer's evening. It's an old tune: everyone knows it.*

*Mayhap better if you're right.* Pat Delgado's voice returned. *For if it's ka, it 'll come like a wind, and your plans will stand before it no more than my da's barn stood before the cyclone when it came.*

Not *ka*; she would not be seduced by the dark and the shadows and the grim shapes of the oil derricks into believing it was. Not *ka* but only a chance meeting with a nice young man on the lonely road back to town.

"I've made myself decent," she said in a dry voice that didn't sound much like her own. "Ye may turn back if you like, Mr. Dearborn."

He did turn and gazed at her. For a moment he said nothing, but she could see the look in his eyes well enough to know that he found her fair as well. And although this disquieted her—perhaps because of what he'd been whistling—she was also

glad. Then he said, "You look well up there. You sit well."

"And I shall have horses of my own to sit before long," she said. *Now the questions will come*, she thought.

But he only nodded, as though he had known this about her already, and began to walk toward town again. Feeling a little disappointed and not knowing exactly why, she clucked sidemouth at Rusher and twitched her knees at him. He got moving, catching up with his master, who gave Rusher's muzzle a companionable little caress.

"What do they call that place yonder?" he asked, pointing at the derricks.

"The oil patch? Citgo."

"Some of the derricks still pump?"

"Aye, and no way to stop them. Not that anyone still knows."

"Oh," he said, and that was all—just *oh*. But he left his place by Rusher's head for a moment when they came to the weedy track leading into Citgo, walking across to look at the old disused guard-hut. In her childhood there had been a sign on it reading authorized personnel only, but it had blown away in some windstorm or other. Will Dearborn had his look and then came ambling back to the horse, boots puffing up summer dust, easy in his new clothes.

They went toward town, a young walking man in a flat-crowned hat, a young riding woman with a poncho spread over her lap and legs. The star-light rained down on them as it has on young men and women since time's first hour, and once she looked up and saw a meteor flash overhead—a brief and brilliant orange streak across the vault of heaven. Susan thought to wish on it, and then, with something like panic, realized she had no idea what to wish for. None at all.

#### 4

She kept her own silence until they were a mile or so from town, and then asked the question which had been on her mind. She had planned to ask hers after he had begun asking his, and it irked her to be the one to break the silence, but in the end her curiosity was too much.

"Where do ye come from, Mr. Dearborn, and what brings ye to our little bit o' Mid-World ... if ye don't mind me asking?"

"Not at all," he said, looking up at her with a smile. "I'm glad to talk and was only

trying to think how to begin. Talk's not a specialty of mine." *Then what is. Will Dearborn?* she wondered. Yes, she wondered very much, for in adjusting her position on the saddle, she had put her hand on the rolled blanket behind . . . and had touched something hidden inside that blanket. Something that felt like a gun. It didn't *have* to be, of course, but she remembered the way his hands had dropped instinctively toward his belt when she had cried out in surprise.

"I come from the In-World. I've an idea you probably guessed that much on your own. We have our own way of talking."

"Aye. Which Barony is yer home, might I ask?"

"New Canaan."

She felt a flash of real excitement at that. New Canaan! Center of the Affiliation! That did not mean all it once had, of course, but still—

"Not Gilead?" she asked, detesting the hint of a girlish gush she heard in her voice. And more than just a hint, mayhap.

"No," he said with a laugh. "Nothing so grand as Gilead. Only Hemphill, a village forty or so wheels west of there. Smaller than Hambry, I wot."

*Wheels*, she thought, marvelling at the archaism. *He said wheels*.

"And what brings ye to Hambry, then? May ye tell?"

"Why not? I've come with two of my friends, Mr. Richard Stock-worth of Pennilton, New Canaan, and Mr. Arthur Heath, a hilarious young man who actually does come from Gilead. We're here at the order of the Affiliation, and have come as counters."

"Counters of what?"

"Counters of anything and everything which may aid the Affiliation in the coming years," he said, and she heard no lightness in his voice now. "The business with the Good Man has grown serious."

"Has it? We hear little real news this far to the south and east of the hub."

He nodded. "The Barony's distance from the hub is the chief reason we're here. Mejis has been ever loyal to the Affiliation, and if supplies need to be drawn from this part of the Outers, they'll be sent. The ques-tion that needs answering is how much the Affiliation can count on."

"How much of what?"

"Yes," he agreed, as if she'd made a statement instead of asking a question. "And how much of what."

"Ye speak as though the Good Man were a real threat. He's just a bandit, surely, frosting his thefts and murders with talk of 'democracy' and 'equality'?"

Dearborn shrugged, and she thought for a moment that would be his only comment on the matter, but then he said, reluctantly: " 'Twas once so, perhaps. Times have changed. At some point the bandit became a general, and now the general would become a ruler in the name of the people." He paused, then added gravely, "The Northern and West'rd Baronies are in flames, lady."

"But those are thousands of miles away, surely!" This talk was upsetting, and yet strangely exciting, too. Mostly it seemed *exotic*, after the pokey all-days-the-same world of Hambry, where someone's dry well was good for three days of animated conversation.

"Yes," he said. Not *aye* but *yes*—the sound was both strange and pleasing to her ear. "But the wind is blowing in this direction." He turned to her and smiled. Once more it softened his hard good looks, and made him seem no more than a child, up too late after his bedtime. "But I don't think we'll see John Farson tonight, do you?"

She smiled back. "If we did, Mr. Dearborn, would ye protect me from him?"

"No doubt," he said, still smiling, "but I should do so with greater enthusiasm, I wot, if you were to let me call you by the name your father gave you."

"Then, in the interests of my own safety, ye may do so. And I suppose I must call ye Will, in those same interests."

" 'Tis both wise and prettily put," he said, the smile becoming a grin, wide and engaging. "I—" Then, walking as he was with his face turned back and up to her, Susan's new friend tripped over a rock jutting out of the road and almost fell. Rusher whinnied through his nose and reared a little. Susan laughed merrily. The poncho shifted, revealing one bare leg, and she took a moment before putting matters right again. She liked him, *aye*, so she did. And what harm could there be in it? He was only a boy, after all. When he smiled, she could see he was only a year or two removed from jumping in haystacks. (The thought that she had recently graduated from haystack-jumping herself had somehow fled her mind.)

"I'm usually not clumsy," he said. "I hope I didn't startle you."

*Not at all. Will; boys have been stubbing their toes around me ever since I grew my breasts.*

"Not at all," she said, and returned to the previous topic. It interested her greatly.



"So ye and yer friends come at the behest of the Affiliation to count our goods, do you?"

"Yes. The reason I took particular note of yon oil patch is because one of us will have to come back and count the working derricks—"

"I can spare ye that, Will. There are nineteen."

He nodded. "I'm in your debt. But we'll also need to make out—if we can—how much oil those nineteen pumps are bringing up."

"Are there so many oil-fired machines still working in New Canaan that such news matters? And do ye have the alchemy to change the oil into the stuff yer machines can use?"

"It's called refinery rather than alchemy in this case—at least I think so—and I believe there is one that still works. But no, we haven't that many machines, although there are still a few working filament-lights in the Great Hall at Gilead."

"Fancy it!" she said, delighted. She had seen pictures of filament-lights and electric flambeaux, but never the lights themselves. The last ones in Hambry (they had been called "spark-lights" in this part of the world, but she felt sure they were the same) had burned out two genera-tions ago.

"You said your father managed the Mayor's horses until his death," Will Dearborn said. "Was his name Patrick Delgado? It was, wasn't it?"

She looked down at him, badly startled and brought back to reality in an instant.

"How do ye know that?"

"His name was in our lessons of calling. We're to count cattle, sheep, pigs, oxen . . . and horses. Of all your livestock, horses are the most im-portant. Patrick Delgado was the man we were to see in that regard. I'm sorry to hear he's come to the clearing at the end of the path, Susan. Will you accept my condolence?"

"Aye, and with thanks."

"Was it an accident?"

"Aye." Hoping her voice said what she wanted it to say, which was *leave this subject, ask no more*.

"Let me be honest with you," he said, and for the first time she thought she heard a false note there. Perhaps it was only her imagination. Certainly she had little experience of the world (Aunt Cord reminded her of this almost daily), but she had an idea that people who set on by saying *Let me be honest with you* were apt to go on by telling you straight-faced that rain fell up, money grew on trees, and babies

were brought by the Grand Featherex.

"Aye, Will Dearborn," she said, her tone just the tiniest bit dry. "They say honesty's the best policy, so they do."

He looked at her a bit doubtfully, and then his smile shone out again. That smile was dangerous, she thought—a quicksand smile if ever there was one. Easy to wander in; perhaps more difficult to wander back out.

"There's not much Affiliation in the Affiliation these days. That's part of the reason Parson's gone on as long as he has; that's what has allowed his ambitions to grow. He's come a far way from the harrier who began as a stage-robber in Garlan and Desoy, and he'll come farther yet if the Affiliation isn't revitalized. Maybe all the way to Mejis."

She couldn't imagine what the Good Man could possibly want with her own sleepy little town in the Barony which lay closest to the Clean Sea, but she kept silent.

"In any case, it wasn't really the Affiliation that sent us," he said. "Not all this way to count cows and oil derricks and hectares of land under cultivation."

He paused a moment, looking down at the road (as if for more rocks in the way of his boots) and stroking Rusher's nose with absentminded gentleness. She thought he was embarrassed, perhaps even 'shamed. "We were sent by our fathers."

"Yer—" Then she understood. Bad boys, they were, sent out on a make-work quest that wasn't quite exile. She guessed their real job in Hambry might be to rehabilitate their reputations. *Well, she thought, it certainly explains the quicksand smile, doesn't it? 'Ware this one, Susan; he's the sort to burn bridges and upset mail-carts, then go on his merry way without a single look back. Not in meanness but in plain old boy-carelessness.*

That made her think of the old song again, the one she'd been singing, the one he'd been whistling.

"Our fathers, yes."

Susan Delgado had cut a caper or two (or perhaps it was two dozen) other own in her time, and she felt sympathy for Will Dearborn as well as caution. And interest. Bad boys could be amusing ... up to a point. The question was, how bad had Will and his cronies been?

"Helling?" she asked.

"Helling," he agreed, still sounding glum but perhaps brightening just a bit about the eyes and mouth. "We were warned; yes, warned very well. There was ... a

certain amount of drinking."

*And a few girls to squeeze with the hand not busy squeezing the ale-pot?* It was a question no nice girl could outright ask, but one that couldn't help occurring to her mind.

Now the smile which had played briefly around the comers of his mouth dropped away. "We pushed it too far and the fun stopped. Fools have a way of doing that. One night there was a race. One *moonless* night. After midnight. All of us drunk. One of the horses caught his hoof in a gopher-hole and snapped a foreleg. He had to be put down."

Susan winced. It wasn't the worst thing she could think of, but bad enough. And when he opened his mouth again, it got worse.

"The horse was a thoroughbred, one of just three owned by my friend Richard's father, who is not well-to-do. There were scenes in our house-holds which I haven't any desire to remember, let alone talk about. I'll make a long story short and say that, after much talk and many proposals for punishment, we were sent here, on this errand. It was Arthur's father's idea. I think Arthur's da has always been a bit appalled by Arthur. Cer-tainly Arthur's ructions didn't come from George Heath's side."

Susan smiled to herself, thinking of Aunt Cordelia saying, "She cer-tainly doesn't get it from *our* side of the family." Then the calculated pause, followed by: "She had a great-aunt on her mother's side who ran crazy . . . you didn't know? Yes! Set herself on fire and threw herself over the Drop. In the year of the comet, it was."

"Anyway," Will resumed, "Mr. Heath set us on with a saying from his own father—'One should meditate in purgatory.' And here we are."

"Hambry's far from purgatory."

He sketched his funny little how again. "If it were, all should want **to** be bad enough to come here and meet the pretty denizens."

"Work on that one a bit," she said in her driest voice. "It's still rough, 1 fear. Perhaps—"

She fell silent as a dismaying realization occurred to her: she was go-ing to have to hope this boy would enter into a limited conspiracy with her. Otherwise, she was apt to be embarrassed.

"Susan?"

"I was just thinking. Are you here yet, Will? Officially, I mean?"

"No," he said, taking her meaning at once. And likely already seeing where this was going. He seemed sharp enough, in his way. "We only ar-rived in Barony this afternoon, and you're the first person any of us has spoken to ... unless, that is, Richard and Arthur have met folks. I couldn't sleep, and so came out to ride and to think things over a little. We're camped over there." He pointed to the right. "On that long slope that runs toward the sea."

"Aye, the Drop, it's called." She realized that Will and his mates might even be camped on what would be her own land by law before much more time had passed. The thought was amusing and exciting and a little startling.

"Tomorrow we ride into town and present our compliments to My Lord Mayor, Hart Thorin. He's a bit of a fool, according to what we were told before leaving New Canaan."

"Were ye indeed told so?" she asked, raising one eyebrow.

"Yes—apt to blabber, fond of strong drink, even more fond of young girls," Will said. "Is it true, would you say?"

"I think ye must judge for yerself," said she, stifling a smile with some effort.

"In any case, we'll also be presenting to the Honorable Kimba Rimer, Thorin's Chancellor, and I understand he knows his beans. And *counts* his beans, as well."

"Thorin will have ye to dinner at Mayor's House," Susan said. "Per-haps not tomorrow night, but surely the night after."

"A dinner of state in Hambry," Will said, smiling and still stroking Rusher's nose.

"Gods, how shall I bear the agony of my anticipation?"

"Never mind yer nettlesome mouth," she said, "but only listen, if ye'd be my friend. This is important."

His smile dropped away, and she saw again—as she had for a moment or two before—the man he'd be before too many more years had passed. The hard face, the concentrated eyes, the merciless mouth. It was a frightening face, in a way—a frightening *prospect*—and yet, still, the place the old hag had touched felt warm and she found it difficult to take her eyes off him. What, she wondered, was his hair like under that stupid hat he wore?

"Tell me, Susan."

"If you and yer friends come to table at Thorin's, ye may see me. If ye see me, Will, see me for the first time. See Miss Delgado, as I shall see Mr. Dearborn. Do'ee take my meaning?"

"To the letter." He was looking at her thoughtfully. "Do you serve? Surely, if your father was the Barony's chief drover, you do not—"

"Never mind what I do or don't do. Just promise that if we meet at Seafront, we meet for the first time."

"I promise. But—"

"No more questions. We've nearly come to the place where we must part ways, and I want to give ye a warning—fair payment for the ride on this nice mount of yours, mayhap. If ye dine with Thorin and Rimer, ye'll not be the only new folk at his table. There'll likely be three others, men Thorin has hired to serve as private guards o' the house."

"Not as Sheriff' s deputies?"

"Nay, they answer to none but Thorin ... or, mayhap, to Rimer. Their names are Jonas, Depape, and Reynolds. They look like hard boys to me ... although Jonas's boyhood is so long behind him that I imagine he's forgot he ever had one."

"Jonas is the leader?"

"Aye. He limps, has hair that falls to his shoulders pretty as any girl's, and the quavery voice of an old gaffer who spends his days polishing the chimney-comer... but I think he's the most dangerous of the three all the same. I'd guess these three have forgot more about helling than you and yer friends will ever learn."

Now why had she told him all that? She didn't know, exactly. Grati-tude, perhaps. He had promised to keep the secret of this late-night meeting, and he had the look of a promise-keeper, in hack with his father or not.

"I'll watch them. And I thank you for the advice." They were now climbing a long, gentle slope. Overhead, Old Mother blazed relentlessly. "Bodyguards," he mused. "Bodyguards in sleepy little Hambry. It's strange times, Susan. Strange indeed."

"Aye." She had wondered about Jonas, Depape, and Reynolds her-self, and could think of no good reason for them to be in town. Had they been Rimer's doing. Rimer's decision? It seemed likely—Thorin wasn't the sort of man to even *think* about bodyguards, she would have said; the High Sheriff had always done well enough for him—but still... why?

They breasted the hill. Below them lay a nestle of buildings—the vil-lage of Hambry. Only a few lights still shone. The brightest cluster marked the Travellers' Rest. From here, on the warm breeze, she could hear the piano beating out "Hey

Jude" and a score of drunken voices gleefully murdering the chorus. Not the three men of whom she had warned Will Dearborn, though; they would be standing at the bar, watching the room with their flat eyes. Not the singing type were those three. Each had a small blue coffin-shape tattooed on his right hand, burned into the web-bing between thumb and forefinger. She thought to tell Will this, then re-alized he'd see for himself soon enough. Instead, she pointed a little way down the slope, at a dark shape which overhung the road on a chain. "Do ye see that?" "Yes." He heaved a large and rather comical sigh. "Is it the object I fear beyond all others? Is it the dread shape of Mrs. Beech's mailbox?"

"Aye. And it's there we must part."

"If you say we must, we must. Yet I wish—" Just then the wind shifted, as it sometimes did in the summer, and blew a strong gust out of the west. The smell of sea-salt was gone in an instant, and so was the sound of the drunken, singing voices. What replaced them was a sound infinitely more sinister, one that never failed to produce a scutter of gooseflesh up her back: a low, atonal noise, like the warble of a siren be-ing turned by a man without much longer to live.

Will took a step backward, eyes widening, and again she noticed his hands take a dip toward his belt, as if reaching for something not there.

"What in gods' name is that?"

"It's a thinny," she said quietly. "In Eyebolt Canyon. Have ye never heard of such?"

"Heard of, yes, but never *heard* until now. Gods, how do you stand it? It sounds *alive!*"

She had never thought of it quite like that, but now, in a way listening with his ears instead of her own, she thought he was right. It was as if some sick part of the night had gained a voice and was actually trying to sing.

She shivered. Rusher felt the momentary increased pressure of her knees and whickered softly, craning his head around to look at her.

"We don't often hear it so clearly at this time of year," she said. "In the fall, the men bum it to quiet."

"I don't understand."

Who did? Who understood anything anymore? Gods, they couldn't even turn off the few oil-pumps in Citgo that still worked, although half of them squealed like pigs in a slaughtering chute. These days you were usually just grateful to find

things that still worked at all.

"In the summer, when there's time, drovers and cowboys drag loads of brush to the mouth of Eyebolt," she said. "Dead brush is all right, but live is better, for it's smoke that's wanted, and the heavier the better. Eye-bolt's a box canyon, very short and steep-walled. Almost like a chimney lying on its side, you see?"

"Yes."

"The traditional time for burning is Reap Mom—the day after the fair and the feast and the fire."

"The first day of winter."

"Aye although in these parts it doesn't feel like winter so soon. In any case it's no tradition; the brush is sometimes lit sooner, if the winds have been prankish or if the sound's particularly strong. It upsets the live-stock, you know—cows give poorly when the noise of the thinnies is strong—and it makes sleep difficult."

"I should think it would." Will was still looking north, and a stronger gust of wind blew his hat off. It fell to his back, the rawhide tugstring pulling against the line of his throat. The hair so revealed was a little long, and as black as a crow's wing. She felt a sudden, greedy desire to run her hands through it, to let her fingers tell its texture—rough or smooth or silky? And how would it smell? At this she felt another shiver of heat down low in her belly. He turned to her as though he had read her mind, and she flushed, grateful that he wouldn't be able to see the darkening of her cheek.

"How long has it been there?"

"Since before I was born," she said, "but not before my da was born. He said that the ground shook in an earthquake just before it came. Some say the earthquake brought it, some say that's superstitious nonsense. All I know is that it's always been there. The smoke quiets it awhile, the way it will quiet a hive of bees or wasps, but the sound always comes back. The brush piled at the mouth helps to keep any wandering livestock out, too—sometimes they're drawn to it, gods know why. But if a cow or sheep *does* happen to get in—after the burning and before the next year's pile has started to grow, mayhap—it doesn't come back out. Whatever it is, it's hungry."

She put his poncho aside, lifted her right leg over the saddle without so much as touching the horn, and slipped off Rusher—all this in a single liquid movement. It was a stunt made for pants rather than a dress, and she knew from the further

widening of his eyes that he'd seen a good lot of her . . . but nothing she had to wash with the bathroom door closed, so what of that? And that quick dismount had ever been a favorite trick of hers when she was in a showoffy mood.

"Pretty!" he exclaimed.

"I learned it from my da," she said, responding to the more innocent interpretation of his compliment. Her smile as she handed him the reins, however, suggested that she was willing to accept the compliment any way it was meant.

"Susan? Have you ever seen the thinny?"

"Aye, once or twice. From above."

"What does it look like?"

"Ugly," she responded at once. Until tonight, when she had observed Rhea's smile up close and endured her twiddling, meddling fingers, she would have said it was the ugliest thing she had ever seen. "It looks a lit-tle like a slow-burning peat fire, and a little like a swamp full of scummy green water. There's a mist that rises off it. Sometimes it looks like long, skinny arms. With hands at the end of em."

"Is it growing?"

"Aye, they say it is, that every thinny grows, but it grows slowly. 'Twon't escape Eyebolt Canyon in your time or mine."

She looked up at the sky, and saw that the constellations had continued to tilt along their tracks as they spoke. She felt she could talk to him all night—about the thinny, or Citgo, or her irritating aunt, or just about anything—and the idea dismayed her. Why should this happen to her now, for the gods' sake? After three years of dismissing the Hambry boys, why should she now meet a boy who interested her so strangely? Why was life so unfair?

Her earlier thought, the one she'd heard in her father's voice, recurred to her: *If it's ka, it'll come like a wind, and your plans will stand before it no more than a barn before a cyclone.*

But no. And no. And no. So set she, with all her considerable determination, her mind against the idea. This was no bam; this was her *life*.

Susan reached out and touched the rusty tin of Mrs. Beech's mailbox, as if to steady herself in the world. Her little hopes and daydreams didn't mean so much, perhaps, but her father had taught her to measure herself by her ability to do the things she'd said she would do, and she would not overthrow his teachings simply because she happened to encounter a good-looking boy at a time when her body



and her emotions were in a stew.

"I'll leave ye here to either rejoin yer friends or resume yer ride," she said. The gravity she heard in her voice made her feel a bit sad, for it was an adult gravity. "But remember yer promise, Will—if ye see me at Seafront—Mayor's House—and if ye'd be my friend, see me there for the first time. As I'd see you." He nodded, and she saw her seriousness now mirrored in his own face. And the sadness, mayhap. "I've never asked a girl to ride out with me, or if she'd accept a visit of me. I'd ask of you, Susan, daughter of Patrick—I'd even bring you flowers to sweeten my chances—but it would do no good, I think."

She shook her head. "Nay. Twouldn't."

"Are you promised in marriage? It's forward of me to ask, I know, but I mean no harm."

"I'm sure ye don't, but I'd as soon not answer. My position is a delicate one just now, as I told ye. Besides, it's late. Here's where we part, Will. But stay . . . one more moment . . ."

She rummaged in the pocket of her apron and brought out half a cake wrapped in a piece of green leaf. The other half she had eaten on her way up to the Coos . . . in what now felt like the other half of her life. She held what was left of her little evening meal out to Rusher, who sniffed it, then ate it and nuzzled her hand. She smiled, liking the velvet tickle in the cup of her palm. "Aye, thee's a good horse, so ye are."

She looked at Will Dearborn, who stood in the road, shuffling his dusty boots and gazing at her unhappily. The hard look was gone from his face, now; he looked her age again, or younger. "We were well met, weren't we?" he asked.

She stepped forward, and before she could let herself think about what she was doing, she put her hands on his shoulders, stood on her toes, and kissed him on the mouth. The kiss was brief but not sisterly.

"Aye, very well met. Will." But when he moved toward her (as thoughtlessly as a flower turning its face to follow the sun), wishing to re-peat the experience, she pushed him back a step, gently but firmly.

"Nay, that was only a thank-you, and one thank-you should be enough for a gentleman. Go yer course in peace, Will."

He took up the reins like a man in a dream, looked at them for a moment as if he didn't know what in the world they were, and then looked back at her. She could

see him working to clear his mind and emotions of the impact her kiss had made. She liked him for it. And she was very glad she had done it.

"And you yours," he said, swinging into the saddle. "I look forward to meeting you for the first time."

He smiled at her, and she saw both longing and wishes in that smile. Then he gighed the horse, turned him, and started back the way they'd come—to have another look at the oil patch, mayhap. She stood where she was, by Mrs. Beech's mailbox, willing him to turn around and wave so she could see his face once more. She felt sure he would . . . but he didn't. Then, just as she was about to turn away and start down the hill to town, he *did* turn, and his hand lifted, fluttering for a moment in the dark like a moth.

Susan lifted her own in return and then went her way, feeling happy and unhappy at the same time. Yet—and this was perhaps the most important thing—she no longer felt soiled. When she had touched the boy's lips, Rhea's touch seemed to have left her skin. A small magic, perhaps, but she welcomed it.

She walked on, smiling a little and looking up at the stars more frequently than was her habit when out after dark.

## CHAPTER IV

### LONG AFTER MOONSET

He rode restlessly for nearly two hours back and forth along what she called the Drop, never pushing Rusher above a trot, although what he wanted to do was gallop the big gelding under the stars until his own blood began to cool a little.

*It'll cool plenty if you draw attention to yourself, he thought, and likely you won't even have to cool it yourself. Fools are the only folk on the earth who can absolutely count on getting what they deserve.* That old saying made him think of the scarred and bowlegged man who had been his life's greatest teacher, and he smiled.

At last he turned his horse down the slope to the trickle of brook which ran there, and followed it a mile and a half upstream (past several gathers of horse; they looked at Rusher with a kind of sleepy, wall-eyed surprise) to a grove of willows. From the hollow within, a horse whick-ered softly. Rusher whickered in return, stamping one hoof and nodding his head up and down.

His rider ducked his own head as he passed through the willow fronds, and suddenly there was a narrow and inhuman white face hanging before him, its upper half all but swallowed by black, pupilless eyes.

He dipped for his guns—the third time tonight he'd done that, and for the third time there was nothing there. Not that it mattered; already he recognized what was hanging before him on a string: that idiotic rook's skull.

The young man who was currently calling himself Arthur Heath had taken it off his saddle (it amused him to call the skull so perched their lookout, "ugly as an old gammer, but perfect cheap to feed") and hung it here as a prank greeting. Him and his jokes! Rusher's master batted it aside hard enough to break the string and send the skull flying into the dark.

"Fie, Roland," said a voice from the shadows. It was reproachful, but there was laughter bubbling just beneath ... as there always was. Cuthbert was his oldest friend—the marks of their first teeth had been embedded on many of the same toys—but Roland had in some ways never understood him. Nor was it just his laughter; on the long-ago day when Hax, the palace cook, was to be hung for a traitor on Gallows Hill, Cuthbert had been in an agony of terror and remorse. He'd told Roland he couldn't stay, couldn't watch . . . but in the end he had done both. Because neither the stupid jokes nor the easy surface emotions were the truth of Cuthbert Allgood.

As Roland entered the hollow at the center of the grove, a dark shape stepped out from behind the tree where it had been keeping. Halfway across the clearing, it resolved itself into a tall, narrow-hipped boy who was barefooted below his jeans and bare-chested above them. In one hand he held an enormous antique

revolver—a kind which was sometimes called a beer-barrel because of the cylinder's size.

"Fie," Cuthbert repeated, as if he liked the sound of this word, not archaic only in forgotten backwaters like Mejis. "That's a fine way to treat the guard o' the watch, smacking the poor thin-faced fellow halfway to the nearest mountain-range!"

"If I'd been wearing a gun, I likely would have blown it to smithereens and woken half the countryside."

"I knew you wouldn't be going about strapped," Cuthbert answered mildly.

"You're remarkably ill-looking, Roland son of Steven, but nobody's fool even as you approach the ancient age of fifteen."

"I thought we agreed we'd use the names we're travelling under. Even among ourselves."

Cuthbert stuck out his leg, bare heel planted in the turf, and bowed with his arms outstretched and his hands strenuously bent at the wrist—an inspired imitation of the sort of man for whom court has become career. He also looked remarkably like a heron standing in a marsh, and Roland snorted laughter in spite of himself. Then he touched the inside of his left wrist to his forehead, to see if he had a fever. He felt feverish enough inside his head, gods knew, but the skin above his eyes felt cool.

"I cry your pardon, gunslinger," Cuthbert said, his eyes and hands still turned humbly down.

The smile on Roland's face died. "And don't call me that again, Cuthbert. Please. Not here, not anywhere. Not if you value me."

Cuthbert dropped his pose at once and came quickly to where Roland sat his horse. He looked honestly humbled.

"Roland—Will—I'm sorry."

Roland clapped him on the shoulder. "No harm done. Just remember from here on out. Mejis may be at the end of the world . . . but it still *is* the world. Where's Alain?"

"Dick, do you mean? Where do you think?" Cuthbert pointed across the clearing, to where a dark hulk was either snoring or slowly choking to death.

"That one," Cuthbert said, "would sleep through an earthquake."

"But you heard me coming and woke."

"Yes," Cuthbert said. His eyes were on Roland's face, searching it with an

intensity that made Roland feel a little uneasy. "Did something happen to you? You look different."

"Do I?"

"Yes. Excited. Aired out, somehow."

If he was going to tell Cuthbert about Susan, now was the time. He decided without really thinking about it (most of his decisions, certainly the best of them, were made in this same way) not to tell. If he met her at Mayor's House, it would be the first time as far as Cuthbert and Alain knew, as well. What harm in that?

"I've been properly aired, all right," he said, dismounting and bending to uncinch the girths of his saddle. "I've seen some interesting things, too."

"Ah? Speak, companion of my bosom's dearest tenant."

"I'll wait until tomorrow, I think, when yon hibernating bear is finally awake. Then I only have to tell once. Besides, I'm tired. I'll share you one thing, though: there are too many horses in these parts, even for a Barony renowned for its horseflesh. Too many by far."

Before Cuthbert could ask any questions, Roland pulled the saddle from Rusher's back and set it down beside three small wicker cages which had been bound together with rawhide, making them into a carrier which could be secured to a horse's back. Inside, three pigeons with white rings around their necks cooed sleepily. One took his head out from beneath his wing, had a peek at Roland, and then tucked himself away again.

"These fellows all right?" Roland asked.

"Fine. Pecking and shitting happily in their straw. As far as they're concerned, they're on vacation. What did you mean about—"

"Tomorrow," Roland said, and Cuthbert, seeing that there would be no more, only nodded and went to find his lean and bony lookout.

Twenty minutes later, Rusher unloaded and rubbed down and set to forage with Buckskin and Glue Boy (Cuthbert could not even name his horse as a normal person would), Roland lay on his back in his bedroll, looking up at the late stars overhead. Cuthbert had gone back to sleep as easily as he had awakened at the sound of Rusher's hoofs, but Roland had never felt less sleepy in his life.

His mind turned back a month, to the whore's room, to his father sitting on the whore's bed and watching him dress. The words his father had spoken—*I have known for two years*—had reverberated like a struck gong in Roland's head. He

suspected they might continue to do so for the rest of his life.

But his father had had much more to say. About Marten. About Roland's mother, who was, perhaps, more sinned against than sinning. About harriers who called themselves patriots. And about John Farson, who had indeed been in Cressia, and who was gone from that place now—vanished, as he had a way of doing, like smoke in a high wind. Before leaving, he and his men had burned Indrie, the Barony seat, pretty much to the ground. The slaughter had been in the hundreds, and perhaps it was no surprise that Cressia had since repudiated the Affiliation and spoken for the Good Man. The Barony Governor, the Mayor of Indrie, and the High Sheriff had all ended the early summer day which concluded Farson's visit with their heads on the wall guarding the town's entrance. That was, Steven Deschain had said, "pretty persuasive politics."

It was a game of Castles where both armies had come out from behind their Hillocks and the final moves had commenced, Roland's father had said, and as was so often the case with popular revolutions, that game was apt to be over before many in the Baronies of Mid-World had begun to realize that John Farson was a serious threat... or, if you were one of those who believed passionately in his vision of democracy and an end to what he called "class slavery and ancient fairy-tales," a serious agent of change.

His father and his father's small *ka-tet* of gunslingers, Roland was amazed to learn, cared little about Farson in either light; they looked upon him as small cheese. Looked upon the Affiliation itself as small cheese; come to that.

*I'm going to send you away,* Steven had said, sitting there on the bed and looking somberly at his only son. *the one who had lived. There is no true safe place left in Mid- World, hut the Barony of Mejis on the Clean Sea is as close to true safety as any place may be these days . . . so it's there you'll go, along with at least two of your mates. Alain, I suppose, for one. Just not that laughing boy for the other, I beg of you. You 'd be better off with a barking dog.*

Roland, who on any other day in his life would have been overjoyed at the prospect of seeing some of the wider world, had protested hotly. If the final battles against the Good Man were at hand, he wanted to fight them at his father's side.

He was a gunslinger now, after all, if only a 'prentice, and—

His father had shaken his head, slowly and emphatically. *No, Roland. You don't understand. You shall, however; as well as possible, you shall.*

Later, the two of them had walked the high battlements above Mid-World's last living city—green and gorgeous Gilead in the morning sun, with its pennons flapping and the vendors in the streets of the Old Quarter and horses trotting on the bridle paths which radiated out from the palace standing at the heart of everything. His father had told him more (not everything), and he had understood more (far from everything—nor did his father understand everything). The Dark Tower had not been mentioned by either of them, but already it hung in Roland's mind, a possibility like a storm cloud far away on the horizon.

Was the Tower what all of this was really about? Not a jumped-up harrier with dreams of ruling Mid-World, not the wizard who had enchanted his mother, not the glass ball which Steven and his posse had hoped to find in Cressia . . . but the Dark Tower?

He hadn't asked.

He hadn't *dared* ask.

Now he shifted in his bedroll and closed his eyes. He saw the girl's face at once; he felt her lips pressed firmly against his own again, and smelled the scent of her skin. He was instantly hot from the top of his head to the base of his spine, cold from the base of his spine to the tips of his toes. Then he thought of the way her legs had flashed as she slid from Rusher's back (also the glimmer of the undergarments beneath her briefly raised dress), and his hot half and cold half changed places.

The whore had taken his virginity but wouldn't kiss him; had turned her face aside when he tried to kiss her. She'd allowed him to do whatever else he wanted, but not that. At the time he'd been bitterly disappointed. Now he was glad.

The eye of his adolescent mind, both restless and clear, considered (he braided which fell down her back to her waist, the soft dimples which had formed at the corners of her mouth when she smiled, the lilt of her voice, her old-fashioned way of saying aye and nay, ye and yer and da. He thought of how her hands had felt on his shoulders as she stretched up to kiss him, and thought he would give everything he owned to feel her hands there again, so light and so firm. And her mouth on his. It was a mouth that knew only a little about kissing, he guessed, but that was a little more than he knew himself.

*Be careful, Roland—don't let your feeling for this girl tip anything over. She's not free, anyway—she said as much. Not married, but spoken for in some other way.*

Roland was far from the relentless creature he would eventually become, but the seeds of that relentlessness were there—small, stony things that would, in their time, grow into trees with deep roots . . . and bitter fruit. Now one of these seeds cracked open and sent up its first sharp blade.

*What's been spoken for may be unspoken, and what's done may be undone.*

*Nothing's sure, but . . . I want her.*

Yes. That was the one thing he did know, and he knew it as well as he knew the face of his father: he wanted her. Not as he had wanted the whore when she lay naked on her bed with her legs spread and her half-lidded eyes looking up at him, but in the way he wanted food when he was hungry or water when he was thirsty. In the way, he supposed, that he wanted to drag Marten's dusty body behind his horse down Gilead's High Road in payment for what the wizard had done to his mother.

He wanted her; he wanted the girl Susan.

Roland turned over on his other side, closed his eyes, and fell asleep. His rest was thin and lit by the crudely poetic dreams only adolescent boys have, dreams where sexual attraction and romantic love come together and resonate more powerfully than they ever will again. In these thirsty visions Susan Delgado put her hands on Roland's shoulders over and over, kissed his mouth over and over, told him over and over to come to her for the first time, to be with her for the first time, to see her for the first time, to see her very well.

## 2

Five miles or so from where Roland slept and dreamed his dreams, Susan Delgado lay in her bed and looked out her window and watched Old Star begin to grow pale with the approaching dawn. Sleep was no closer now than it had been when she lay down, and there was a throb between her legs where the old woman had touched her. It was distracting but no longer unpleasant, because she now associated it with the boy she'd met on the road and impulsively kissed by starlight. Every time she shifted her legs, that throb flared into a brief sweet ache. When she'd got home, Aunt Cord (who would have been in her own bed an hour before on any ordinary night) had been sitting in her rocking chair by the fireplace—dead and cold and swept clean of ashes at this time of year—with a



lapful of lace that looked like wave-froth against her dowdy black dress. She was edging it with a speed that seemed almost supernatural to Susan, and she hadn't looked up when the door opened and her niece came in on a swirl of breeze.

"I expected ye an hour ago," Aunt Cord said. And then, although she didn't sound it: "I was worried."

"Aye?" Susan said, and said no more. She thought that on any other night she would have offered one of her fumbling excuses which always sounded like a lie to her own ears—it was the effect Aunt Cord had had on her all her life—but this hadn't been an ordinary night. Never in her life had there been a night like this.

She found she could not get Will Dearborn out of her mind.

Aunt Cord had looked up then, her close-set, rather beady eyes sharp and inquisitive above her narrow blade of a nose. Some things hadn't changed since Susan had set out for the Coos; she had still been able to feel her aunt's eyes brushing across her face and down her body, like little whisk-brooms with sharp bristles.

"What took ye so long?" Aunt Cord had asked. "Was there trouble?"

"No trouble," Susan had replied, but for a moment she thought of how the witch had stood beside her in the doorway, pulling her braid through the gnarled tube of one loosely clenched fist. She remembered wanting to go, and she remembered asking Rhea if their business was done.

*Mayhap there's one more little thing*, the old woman had said ... or so Susan thought. But what had that one more little thing been? She couldn't remember. And, really, what did it matter? She was shut of Rhea until her belly began to rise with Thorin's child . . . and if there could be no baby-making until Reap-Night, she'd not be returning to the Coos un-til late winter at the soonest. An age! And it would be longer than that, were she slow to kindle . . .

"I walked slowly coming home, Aunt. That's all."

"Then why look ye so?" Aunt Cord had asked, scant brows knitting toward the vertical line which creased her brow.

"How so?" Susan had asked, taking off her apron and knotting the strings and hanging it on the hook just inside the kitchen door.

"Flushy. Frothy. Like milk fresh out of the cow."

She'd almost laughed. Aunt Cord, who knew as little about men as Susan did about the stars and planets, had struck it directly. Flushy and frothy was exactly

how she felt. "Only the night air, I suppose," she had said. "I saw a meteor, Aunt. And heard the thinny. The sound's strong tonight."

"Aye?" her aunt asked without interest, then returned to the subject which did interest her. "Did it hurt?"

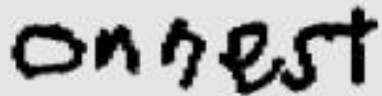
"A little."

"Did ye cry?"

Susan shook her head.

"Good. Better not. Always better. She likes it when they cry, I've heard. Now, Sue—did she give you something? Did the old pussy give you something?"

"Aye." She reached into her pocket and brought out the paper with



written upon it. She held it out and her aunt snatched it away with a greedy look. Cordelia had been quite the sugarplum over the last month or so, but now that she had what she wanted (and now that Susan had come too far and promised too much to have a change of heart), she'd reverted to the sour, supercilious, often suspicious woman Susan had grown up with; the one who'd been driven into almost weekly bouts of rage by her phlegmatic, life-goes-as-'twill brother. In a way, it was a relief. It had been nervewracking to have Aunt Cord playing Cybilla Good-Sprite day after day.

"Aye, aye, there's her mark, all right," her aunt had said, tracing her fingers over the bottom of the sheet. "A devil's hoof's what it means, some say, but what do we care, eh. Sue? Nasty, horrid creature that she is, she's still made it possible for two women to get on in the world a little longer. And ye'll only have to see her once more, probably around Year's End, when ye've caught proper."

"It will be later than that," Susan had told her. "I'm not to lie with him until the full of the Demon Moon. After the Reaping Fair and the bonfire."

Aunt Cord had stared, eyes wide, mouth open. "Said she so?"

*Are you calling me a liar. Auntie?* she had thought with a sharpness that wasn't much like her; usually her nature was more like her father's.

"Aye."

"But why? Why so *long*?" Aunt Cord was obviously upset, obviously disappointed. There had so far been eight pieces of silver and four of gold out of this; they were tucked up wherever it was that Aunt Cord squirreled her money away (and Susan suspected there was a fair amount of it, al-though Cordelia liked to plead poverty at every opportunity), and twice that much was still owed ... or would be, once the bloodstained sheet went to the Mayor's House laundress. That same amount would be paid yet again when Rhea had confirmed the baby, and the baby's honesty. A lot of money, all told. A *great* lot, for a little place like this and little folk like them. And now, to have the paying of it put back so far . . .

Then came a sin Susan had prayed over (although without much enthusiasm) before getting into her bed: she had rather enjoyed the cheated, frustrated look on Aunt Cord's face—the look of the thwarted miser.

"Why so *long*?" she repeated.

"I suppose you could go up the Coos and ask her."

Cordelia Delgado's lips, thin to begin with, had pressed together so tightly they almost disappeared. "Are you pert, missy? Are you pert with me?"

"No. I'm much too tired to be pert with anyone. I want to wash—I can still feel her hands on me, so I can—and go to bed."

"Then do so. Perhaps in the morning we can discuss this in more ladylike fashion. And we must go and see Hart, of course." She folded the paper Rhea had given Susan, looking pleased at the prospect of visiting Hart Thorin, and moved her hand toward her dress pocket.

"No," Susan said, and her voice had been unusually sharp—enough so to freeze her aunt's hand in midair. Cordelia had looked at her, frankly startled. Susan had felt a little embarrassed by that look, but she hadn't dropped her eyes, and when she held out her own hand, it had been steady enough.

"I'm to have the keeping of that. Aunt."

"Who tells ye to speak so?" Aunt Cord had asked, her voice almost whining with outrage—it was close to blasphemy, Susan supposed, but for a moment Aunt Cord's voice had reminded her of the sound the thinny made. "Who tells ye to speak so to the woman who raised a motherless girl? To the sister of that girl's poor dead father?"

"You know who," Susan said. She still held her hand out. "I'm to keep it, and I'm to give it to Mayor Thorin. She said she didn't care what happened to it then, he

could wipe his bum with it for all of her," (the flush which suffused her aunt's face at that had been very enjoyable) "but *until* then, it was to be in my keeping."

"I never heard of such a thing," Aunt Cordelia had huffed . . . but she had handed the grimy scrap of paper back. "Giving the keep of such an important document to a mere scrap of a girl."

*Yet not too mere a scrap to be his gilly, am I? To lie under him and listen to his bones creak and take his seed and mayhap bear his child.*

She'd dropped her eyes to her pocket as she put the paper away again, not wanting Aunt Cord to see the resentment in them.

"Go up," Aunt Cord had said, brushing the froth of lace off her lap and into her workbasket, where it lay in an unaccustomed tangle. "And when you wash, do your mouth with especial care. Cleanse it of its impudence and disrespect toward those who have given up much for love of its owner."

Susan had gone silently, biting back a thousand retorts, mounting the stairs as she had so often, throbbing with a mixture of shame and resentment.

And now here she was, in her bed and still awake as the stars paled away and the first brighter shades began to color the sky. The events of the night just past slipped through her mind in a kind of fantastical blur, like shuffled playing cards—and the one which turned up with the most persistence was the face of Will Dearborn. She thought of how that face could be hard at one moment and soften so unexpectedly at the next. And was it a handsome face? Aye, she thought so. For herself, she knew so.

*I've never asked a girl to ride out with me, or if she would accept a visit of me. I would ask you, Susan, daughter of Patrick.*

*Why now? Why should I meet him now, when no good can come of it?*

*If it's ka, it 'll come like a wind. Like a cyclone.*

She tossed from one side of the bed to the other, then at last rolled onto her back again. There would be no sleep for her in what remained of this night, she thought. She might as well walk out on the Drop and watch the sun come up.

Yet she continued to lie in bed, feeling somehow sick and well at the same time, looking into the shadows and listening to the first cries of the morning birds, thinking of how his mouth had felt against hers, the tender grain of it and the feeling of his teeth below his lips; the smell of his skin, the rough texture of his shirt under her palms.

She now put those palms against the top of her shift and cupped her breasts with her fingers. The nipples were hard, like little pebbles. And when she touched them, the heat between her legs flared suddenly and urgently.

She *could* sleep, she thought. She could, if she took care of that heat. If she knew how.

And she did. The old woman had shown her. *Even a girl who's intact don't need to lack for a shiver now 'n then... Like a little bud o' silk, so it is.*

Susan shifted in bed and slipped a hand deep beneath the sheet. She forced the old woman's bright eyes and hollow cheeks out of her mind—it wasn't hard to do at all once you set your mind to it, she discovered—and replaced it with the face of the boy with the big gelding and the silly flat-crowned hat. For a moment the vision of her mind became so clear and so sweet that it was real, and all the rest of her life only a drab dream. In this vision he kissed her over and over, their mouths widening, their tongues touching; what he breathed out, she breathed in.

She burned. She burned in her bed like a torch. And when the sun finally came over the horizon some short time later, she lay deeply asleep, with a faint smile on her lips and her unbraided hair lying across the side of her face and her pillow like loose gold.

### 3

In the last hour before dawn, the public room of the Travellers' Rest was as quiet as it ever became. The gaslights which turned the chandelier into a brilliant jewel until two of the clock or so on most nights were now turned down to guttering blue points, and the long, high room was shadowy and spectral.

In one corner lay a jumble of kindling—the remains of a couple of chairs smashed in a fight over a Watch Me game (the combatants were currently residing in the High Sheriff's drunk-cell). In another corner was a fairly large puddle of congealing puke. On the raised platform at the east end of the room stood a battered piano; propped against its bench was the ironwood club which belonged to Barkie, the saloon's bouncer and all-around tough man. Barkie himself, the naked mound of his scarred stomach rising above the waistband of his corduroy pants like a clot of bread dough, lay under the bench, snoring. In one hand he held a playing card: the deuce of diamonds.

At the west end of the room were the card tables. Two drunks lay with their heads on one of these, snoring and drooling on the green felt, their outstretched hands touching. Above them, on the wall, was a picture of Arthur, the Great King of Eld astride his white stallion, and a sign which read (in a curious mixture of High and Low Speech): ARGYOU NOT ABOUT THE HAND YOU ARE DELT IN CARDS OR LIFE.

Mounted behind the bar, which ran the length of the room, was a monstrous trophy: a two-headed elk with a rack of antlers like a forest grove and four glaring eyes. This beast was known to local habitués of the Travellers' as The Romp. None could have said why. Some wit had care-fully drawn a pair of sow-titty condoms over the prongs of two of its antlers. Lying on the bar itself and directly beneath The Romp's disap-proving gaze was Pettie the Trotter, one of the Travellers' dancers and gilly-girls . . . although Pettie's actual girlhood was well behind her now, and soon she would be reduced to doing her business on her knees behind the Travellers' rather than upstairs in one of the tiny cribs. Her plump legs were spread, one dangling over the bar on the inside, one on the outside, the filthy tangle of her skirt frothed up between. She breathed in long snores, occasionally twitching at the feet and fat fingers. The only other sounds were the hot summer wind outside and the soft, regular snap of cards being turned one by one.

A small table stood by itself near the batwing doors which gave upon the Hambry High Street; it was here that Coral Thorin, owner of the Trav-ellers' Rest (and the Mayor's sister), sat on the nights when she de-scended from her suite "to be a part of the company." When she came down, she came down early—when there were still more steaks than whiskey being served across the old scratched bar—and went back up around the time that Sheb, the piano player, sat down and began to pound his hideous instrument. The Mayor himself never came in lit nil, although it was well-known that he owned at least a half-interest in the Travellers'. Clan Thorin enjoyed the money the place brought in; they just didn't en-joy the look of it after midnight, when the sawdust spread on the floor be-gan to soak up the spilled beer and the spilled blood. Yet there was a hard streak in Coral, who had twenty years before been what was called "a wild child." She was younger than her political brother, not so thin, and good-looking in a large-eyed, weasel-headed way. No one sat at her table during the saloon's operating hours—Barkie would

have put a stop to anyone who tried, and double-quick—but operating hours were over now, the drunks mostly gone or passed out upstairs, Sheb curled up and fast asleep in the comer behind his piano. The softheaded boy who cleaned the place had been gone since two o' the clock or so (chased out by jeers and insults and a few flying beer-glasses, as he always was; Roy Depape in particular had no love in his heart for that particular lad). He would be back around nine or so, to begin readying the old party-palace for another night of hilarity, but until then the man sitting at Mistress Thorin's table had the place to himself.

A game of Patience was laid out before him: black on red, red on black, the partially formed Square o' Court above all, just as it was in the affairs of men. In his left hand the player held the remains of the deck. As he flipped the cards up, one by one, the tattoo on his right hand moved. It was disconcerting somehow, as if the coffin were breathing. The card-player was an oldish fellow, not as thin as the Mayor or his sister, but thin. His long white hair straggled down his back. He was deeply tanned, ex-cept for his neck, where he always burned; the flesh there hung in scant wattles. He wore a mustache so long the ragged white ends hung nearly to his jaw—a sham gunslinger's mustache, many thought it, but no one used the word "sham" to Eldred Jonas's face. He wore a white silk shirt, and a black-handled revolver hung low on his hip. His large, red-rimmed eyes looked sad on first glance. A second, closer look showed them only to be watery. Of emotion they were as dead as the eyes of The Romp.

He turned up the Ace of Wands. No place for it. "Pah, you bugger," he said in an odd, reedy voice. It quavered, as well, like the voice of a man on the verge of tears. It fit perfectly with his damp and red-rimmed eyes. He swept the cards together.

Before he could reshuffle, a door opened and closed softly upstairs. Jonas put the cards aside and dropped his hand to the butt of his gun.

Then, as he recognized the sound of Reynolds's boots coming along the gallery, he let go of the gun and drew his tobacco-pouch from his belt in-stead. The hem of the cloak Reynolds always wore came into view, and then he was coming down the stairs, his face freshly washed and his curly red hair hanging about his ears. Vain of his looks was dear old Mr. Rey-nolds, and why not? He'd sent his cock on its exploring way up more damp and cozy cracks than Jonas had ever seen in his life, and Jonas was twice his age.

At the bottom of the stairs Reynolds walked along the bar, pausing to squeeze one of Pettie's plump thighs, and then crossed to where Jonas sat with his makings and his deck of cards.

"Evening, Eldred."

"Morning, Clay." Jonas opened the sack, took out a paper, and sprinkled tobacco into it. His voice shook, but his hands were steady. "Like a smoke?"

"I could do with one."

Reynolds pulled out a chair, turned it around, and sat with his fore-arms crossed on its back. When Jonas handed him the cigarette, Reynolds danced it along the backs of his fingers, an old gunslinger trick. The Big Coffin Hunters were full of old gunslinger tricks.

"Where's Roy? With Her Nibs?" They had been in Hambry a little over a month now, and in that time Depape had conceived a passion for a fifteen-year-old whore named Deborah. Her bowlegged clumping walk and her way of squinting off into the distance led Jonas to suspect she was just another cowgirl from a long line of them, but she had high-hat ways. It was Clay who had started calling the girl Her Nibs, or Her Majesty, or sometimes (when drunk) "Roy's Coronation Cunt."

Reynolds now nodded. "It's like he's drunk on her."

"He'll be all right. He ain't throwing us over for some little snuggle-bunny with pimples on her tits. Why, she's so ignorant she can't spell cat. Not so much as cat, no. I asked her."

Jonas made a second cigarette, drew a sulfur match from the sack, and popped it alight with his thumbnail. He lit Reynolds's first, then his own.

A small yellow cur came in under the batwing doors. The men watched it in silence, smoking. It crossed the room, first sniffed at the curdled vomit in the corner, then began to eat it. Its stub of a tail wagged back and forth as it dined. Reynolds nodded toward the admonition not to argue about the cards you were dealt. "That mutt'd understand that, I'd say."

"Not at all, not at all," Jonas demurred. "Just a dog is all he is, a spew-eating dog. I heard a horse twenty minutes ago. First on the come, then on the go. Would it have been one of our hired watchmen?"

"You don't miss a trick, do you?"

"Don't pay to, no, don't pay a bit. Was it?"

"Yep. Fellow who works for one of the small freeholders out along the east end of



the Drop. He seen 'em come in. Three. Young. Babies." Reynolds pronounced this last as they did in the North'rd Baronies: *bab-bies*. "Nothing to worry of."

"Now, now, we don't know that," Jonas said, his quavering voice making him sound like a temporizing old man. "Young eyes see far, they say."

"Young eyes see what they're pointed at," Reynolds replied. The dog trotted past him, licking its chops. Reynolds helped it on its way with a kick the cur was not quite quick enough to avoid. It scuttled back out under the batwings, uttering little *yike-yike* sounds that made Barkie snort thickly from his place of rest beneath the piano bench. His hand opened and the playing card dropped out of it.

"Maybe so, maybe not," Jonas said. "In any case, they're Affiliation brats, sons of big estates off in the Green Somewhere, if Rimer and that fool he works for have it straight. That means we'll be very, very careful. Walk easy, like on eggshells. Why, we've got three more months here, at least! And those young'uns may be here that whole time, counting this 'n counting that and putting it all down on paper. Folks counting things ain't good for us right now. Not for men in the resupply business."

"Come on! It's make-work, that's all—a slap on the wrist for getting in trouble. Their daddies—"

"Their daddies know Farson's in charge of the whole Southwest Edge now, and sitting on high ground. The brats may know the same—that playtime's purt' near over for the Affiliation and all its pukesome royalty. Can't know, Clay. With folks like these, you can't know which way they'll jump. At the very least, they may try to do a half-decent job just to try and get on the good side o' their parents again. We'll know better when we see em, but I tell you one thing: we can't just put guns to the backs of their heads and drop them like broke-leg bosses if they see the wrong thing. Their daddies might be mad at em alive, but I think they'd be very tender of em dead—that's just the way daddies are. We'll want to be trig, Clay; as trig as we can be."

"Better leave Depape out of it, then."

"Roy will be fine," Jonas said in his quavery voice. He dropped the stub of his cigarette to the floor and crushed it under his bootheel. He looked up at The Romp's glassy eyes and squinted, as if calculating. "To-night, your friend said? They arrived tonight, these brats?"

"Yep."

"They'll be in to see Avery tomorrow, then, I reckon." This was Herk Avery, High Sheriff of Mejis and Chief Constable of Hambry, a large man who was as loose as a trundle of laundry.

"Reckon so," Clay Reynolds said. "To present their papers 'n all."

"Yes, sir, yes indeedy. How-d'you-do, and how-d'you-do, and how-d'you-do again."

Reynolds said nothing. He often didn't understand Jonas, but he had been riding with him since the age of fifteen, and knew it was usually bet-ter not to ask for enlightenment. If you did, you were apt to end up listen-ing to a cult-manni lecture about the other worlds the old buzzard had visited through what he called "the special doors." As far as Reynolds was concerned, there were enough ordinary doors in the world to keep him busy.

"I'll speak to Rimer and Rimer'll talk to the Sheriff about where they should stay," Jonas said. "I think the bunkhouse at the old Bar K ranch. You know where I mean?"

Reynolds did. In a Barony like Mejis, you got to know the few land-marks in a hurry. The Bar K was a deserted spread of land northwest of town, not too far from that weird squalling canyon. They burned at the mouth of the canyon every fall, and once, six or seven years ago, the wind had shifted and gone back wrong and burned most of the Bar K to the ground—barns, stables, the home place. It had spared the bunkhouse, however, and that would be a good spot for three tenderfeet from the Inners. It was away from the Drop; it was also away from the oil patch.

"Ye like it, don't ye?" Jonas asked, putting on a hick Hambry accent. "Aye, ye like it very much, I can see ye do, my cully. Ye know what they say in Cressia? 'Ifye'd steal the silver from the dining room, first put the dog in the pantry.' "

Reynolds nodded. It was good advice. "And those trucks? Those what-do-you-callums, tankers?"

"Fine where they are," Jonas said. "Not that we could move em now without attracting the wrong kind of attention, eh? You and Roy want to go out there and cover them with brush. Lay it on nice and thick. Day after tomorrow you'll do it."

"And where will you be while we're flexing our muscles out at Citgo?"

"By daylight? Preparing for dinner at Mayor's House, you clod—the dinner Thorin will be giving to introduce his guests from the Great World to the shitpicky

society of the smaller one." Jonas began making another cigarette. He gazed up at The Romp rather than at what he was doing, and still spilled barely a scrap of tobacco. "A bath, a shave, a trim of these tangled old man's locks ... I might even wax my mustache, Clay, what do you say to that?"

"Don't strain yourself, Eldred."

Jonas laughed, the sound shrill enough to make Barkie mutter and Pettie stir uneasily on her makeshift bar-top bed. "So Roy and I aren't invited to this fancy do." "You'll be invited, oh yes, you'll be invited very warmly," Jonas said, and handed Reynolds the fresh cigarette. He began making another for himself. "I'll offer your excuses. I'll do you boys proud, count on me. Strong men may weep." "All so we can spend the day out there in the dust and stink, covering those hulks. You're too kind, Jonas."

"I'll be asking questions, as well," Jonas said dreamily. "Drifting here and there . . . looking spruce, smelling of baybemes . . . and asking my little questions. I've known folks in our line of trade who'll go to a fat, jolly fellow to find out the gossip—a saloon-keeper or bartender, perhaps a livery stable owner or one of the chubby fellows who always hangs about the jail or the courthouse with his thumbs tucked into his vest pock-ets. As for myself. Clay, I find that a woman's best, and the narrower the better—one with more nose than tits sticking off her. I look for one who don't paint her lips and keeps her hair scooped back against her head."

"You have someone in mind?"

"Yar. Cordelia Delgado's her name."

"Delgado?"

"You know the name, it's on the lips of everyone in this town, I reckon. Susan Delgado, our esteemed Mayor's soon-to-be gilly. Cor-delia's her auntie. Now here's a fact of human nature I've found: folk are more apt to talk to someone like her, who plays them close, than they are to the local jolly types who'll buy you a drink. And that lady plays them close. I'm going to slip in next to her at that dinner, and I'm going to compliment her on the perfume I doubt like hell she'll be wearing, and I'm going to keep her wineglass full. Now, how sounds that for a plan?"

"A plan for what? That's what I want to know."

"For the game of Castles we may have to play," Jonas said, and all the lightness dropped out of his voice. "We're to believe that these boys have been sent here

more as punishment than to do any real job of work. It sounds plausible, too. I've known rakes in my time, and it sounds plausible, indeed. I believe it each day until about three in the morning, and then a little doubt sets in. And do you know what, Clay?"

Reynolds shook his head.

"I'm *right* to doubt. Just as I was right to go with Rimer to old man Thorin and convince him that Farson's glass would be better with the witch-woman, for the nonce. She'll keep it in a place where a *gunslinger* couldn't find it, let alone a nosy lad who's yet to have his first piece of arse. These are strange times. A storm's coming. And when you know the wind is going to blow, it's best to keep your gear battened down."

He looked at the cigarette he had made. He had been dancing it along the backs of his knuckles, as Reynolds had done earlier. Jonas pushed back the fall of his hair and tucked the cigarette behind his ear.

"I don't want to smoke," he said, standing up and stretching. His back made small crackling sounds. "I'm crazy to smoke at this hour of the morning. Too many cigarettes are apt to keep an old man like me awake."

He walked toward the stairs, squeezing Pettie's bare leg as he went by, also as Reynolds had done. At the foot of the stairs he looked back.

"I don't want to kill them. Things are delicate enough without that. I'll smell quite a little wrong on them and not lift a finger, no, not a single finger of my hand. But . . . I'd like to make them clear on their place in the great scheme o' things."

"Give them a sore paw."

Jonas brightened. "Yessir, partner, maybe a sore paw's just what I'd like to give them. Make them think twice about tangling with the Big Coffin Hunters later on, when it matters. Make them swing wide around us when they see us in their road. Yessir, that's something to think about. It really is."

He started up the stairs, chuckling a little, his limp quite pronounced—it got worse late at night. It was a limp Roland's old teacher, Cort, might have recognized, for Cort had seen the blow which caused it. Cort's own father had dealt it with an ironwood club, breaking Eldred Jonas's leg in the yard behind the Great Hall of Gilead before taking the boy's weapon and sending him west, gunless, into exile.

Eventually, the man the boy had become had found a gun, of course; the exiles

always did, if they looked hard enough. That such guns could never be quite the same as the big ones with the sandalwood grips might haunt them for the rest of their lives, but those who needed guns could still find them, even in this world. Reynolds watched until he was gone, then took his seat at Coral Thorin's desk, shuffled the cards, and continued the game which Jonas had left half-finished. Outside, the sun was coming up.

## CHAPTER V

### WELCOME TO TOWN

1

Two nights after arriving in the Barony of Mejis, Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain rode their mounts beneath an adobe arch with the words come in peace inscribed above it. Beyond was a cobblestone courtyard lit with torches. The resin which coated these had been doctored somehow so that the torches glowed different colors: green, orangey-red, a kind of sputtery pink that made Roland think of fireworks. He could hear the sound of gui-tars, the murmur of voices, the laughter of women. The air was redolent of those smells which would always remind him of Mejis: sea-salt, oil, and pine.

"I don't know if I can do this," Alain muttered. He was a big boy with a mop of unruly blond hair spilling out from under his stockman's hat. He had cleaned up

well—they all had—but Alain, no social butterfly under the best of circumstances, looked scared to death. Cuthbert was doing better, but Roland guessed his old friend's patina of insouciance didn't go very deep. If there was to be leading done here, he would have to do it.

"You'll be fine," he told Alain. "Just—"

"Oh, he *looks* fine," Cuthbert said with a nervous laugh as they crossed the courtyard. Beyond it was Mayor's House, a sprawling, many-winged adobe hacienda that seemed to spill light and laughter from every window. "White as a sheet, ugly as a—"

"Shut up," Roland said curtly, and the teasing smile tumbled off Cuthbert's face at once. Roland noted this, then turned to Alain again. "Just don't drink anything with alcohol in it. You know what to say on that account. Remember the rest of our story, too. Smile. Be pleasant. Use what social graces you have. Remember how the Sheriff fell all over himself to make us feel welcome."

Alain nodded at that, looking a little more confident.

"In the matter of social graces," Cuthbert said, "they won't have many themselves, so we should all be a step ahead."

Roland nodded, then saw that the bird's skull was back on the horn of Cuthbert's saddle. "And get rid of that!"

Looking guilty, Cuthbert stuffed "the lookout" hurriedly into his saddle-bag. Two men wearing white jackets, white pants, and sandals were coming forward, bowing and smiling.

"Keep your heads," Roland said, lowering his voice. "Both of you. Remember why you're here. And remember the faces of your fathers." He clapped Alain, who still looked doubtful, on the shoulder. Then he turned to the hostlers. "Goodeven, gents," he said. "May your days be long upon the earth."

They both grinned, their teeth flashing in the extravagant torchlight. The older one bowed. "And your own as well, young masters. Welcome to Mayor's House."

## 2

The High Sheriff had welcomed them the day before every bit as happily as the hostlers.

So far *everyone* had greeted them happily, even the carters they had passed on

their way into town, and that alone made Roland feel suspicious and on his guard. He told himself he was likely being foolish—of *course* the locals were friendly and helpful, that was why they had been sent here, because Mejis was both out-of-the-way and loyal to the Affiliation—and it probably *was* foolish, but he thought it best to be on close watch, just the same. To be a trifle nervous. The three of them were little more than children, after all, and if they fell into trouble here, it was apt to be as a result of taking things at face value.

The combined Sheriff's office and jail o' Barony was on Hill Street, overlooking the bay. Roland didn't know for sure, but guessed that few if any hungover drunks and wife-beaters anywhere else in Mid-World woke up to such picturesque views: a line of many-colored boathouses to the south, the docks directly below, with boys and old men line-fishing while the women mended nets and sails; beyond them, Hambry's small fleet moving back and forth on the sparkling blue water of the bay, setting their nets in the morning, pulling them in the afternoon.

Most buildings on the High Street were adobe, but up here, overlooking Hambry's business section, they were as squat and bricky as any narrow lane in Gilead's Old Quarter. Well kept, too, with wrought-iron gates in front of most and tree-shaded paths. The roofs were orange tile, the shutters closed against the summer sun. It was hard to believe, riding down this street with their horses' hoofs clocking on the swept cobbles, that the northwestern side of the Affiliation—the ancient land of Eld, Arthur's kingdom—could be on fire and in danger of falling. The jailhouse was just a larger version of the post office and land office; a smaller version of the Town Gathering Hall. Except, of course, for the bars on the windows facing down toward the small harbor.

Sheriff Herk Avery was a big-bellied man in a lawman's khaki pants and shirt. He must have been watching them approach through the spy hole in the center of the jail's iron-banded front door, because the door was thrown open before Roland could even reach for the turn-bell in the center. Sheriff Avery appeared on the stoop, his belly preceding him as a bailiff may precede My Lord Judge into court. His arms were thrown wide in the most amiable of greetings.

He bowed deeply to them (Cuthbert said later he was afraid the man might overbalance and go rolling down the steps; perhaps go rolling all the way down to the harbor) and wished them repeated goodmorns, tapping away at the base of his throat like a madman the whole while. His smile was so wide it looked as if it

might cut his head clean in two. Three deputies with a distinctly farmerish look about them, dressed in khaki like the Sheriff, crowded into the door behind Avery and gawked. That was what it was, all right, a gawk; there was just no other word for that sort of openly curious and totally unselfconscious stare.

Avery shook each boy by the hand, continuing to bow as he did so, and nothing Roland said could get him to stop until he was done. When he finally was, he showed them inside. The office was delightfully cool in spite of the beating midsummer sun. That was the advantage of brick, of course. It was big as well, and cleaner than any High Sheriff's office Roland had ever been in before . . . and he had been in at least half a dozen over the last three years, accompanying his father on several short trips and one longer patrol-swing.

There was a rolltop desk in the center, a notice-board to the right of the door (the same sheets of foolscap had been scribbled on over and over; paper was a rare commodity in Mid-World), and, in the far corner, two rifles in a padlocked case. These were such ancient blunderbusses that Roland wondered if there was ammunition for them. He wondered if they would fire, come to that. To the left of the gun-case, an open door gave on the jail itself—three cells on each side of a short corridor, and a smell of strong lye soap drifting out.

*They've cleaned for our coming,* Roland thought. He was amused, touched, and uneasy. *Cleaned it as though we were a troop of Inner Barony horse—career soldiers who might want to stage a hard inspection instead of three lads serving punishment detail.*

But was such nervous care on the part of their hosts really so strange? They were from New Canaan, after all, and folk in this tucked-away corner of the world might well see them as a species of visiting royalty.

Sheriff Avery introduced his deputies. Roland shook hands with all of them, not trying to memorize their names. It was Cuthbert who took care of names, and it was a rare occasion when he dropped one. The third, a bald fellow with a monocle hanging around his neck on a ribbon, actually dropped to one knee before them. "Don't do that, ye great idiot!" Avery cried, yanking him back up by the scruff of his neck. "What kind of a bumpkin will they think ye? Be-sides, you've embarrassed them, so ye have!"

"That's all right," Roland said (he was, in fact, very embarrassed, although trying not to show it). "We're really nothing at all special, you know—"



"Nothing special!" Avery said, laughing. His belly, Roland noticed, did not shake as one might have expected it to do; it was harder than it looked. The same might be true of its owner. "Nothing special, he says! Five hundred mile or more from the In-World they've come, our first official visitors from the Affiliation since a gunslinger passed through on the Great Road four year ago, and yet he says they're nothing special! Would ye sit, my boys? I've got *graf*, which ye won't want so early in the day— p'raps not at all, given your ages (and if you'll forgive me for statin so bald the obvious fact of yer youth, for youth's not a thing to be ashamed of, so it's not, we were all young once), and I also have white iced tea, which I recommend most hearty, as Dave's wife makes it and she's a dab hand with most any potable."

Roland looked at Cuthbert and Alain, who nodded and smiled (and tried not to look all at sea), then back at Sheriff Avery. White tea would go down a treat in a dusty throat, he said.

One of the deputies went to fetch it, chairs were produced and set in a row at one side of Sheriff Avery's rolltop, and the business of the day commenced.

"You know who ye are and where ye hail from, and I know the same," Sheriff Avery said, sitting down in his own chair (it uttered a fee-ble groan beneath his bulk but held steady). "I can hear In-World in yer voices, but more important, I can see it in yer faces.

"Yet we hold to the old ways here in Hambry, sleepy and rural as we may be; aye, we hold to our course and remember the faces of our fathers as well's we can. So, although I'd not keep yer long from yer duties, and if ye'll forgive me for the impertinence, I'd like a look at any papers and documents of passage ye might just happen to've brought into town with ye."

They just "happened" to have brought *all* of their papers into town with them, as Roland was sure Sheriff Avery well knew they would. He went through them quite slowly for a man who'd promised not to hold them from their duties, tracing the well-folded sheets (the linen content so high that the documents were perhaps closer to cloth than paper) with one pudgy finger, his lips moving. Every now and then the finger would re-verse as he reread a line. The two other deputies stood behind him, look-ing sagely down over his large shoulders. Roland wondered if either could actually read.

William Dearborn. Drover's son.

Richard Stockworth. Rancher's son.

Arthur Heath. Stockline breeder's son.

The identification document belonging to each was signed by an at-testor—James Reed (of Hemphill) in the case of Dearborn, Piet Raven-head (of Pennilton) in the case of Stockworth, Lucas Rivers (of Gilead) in the case of Heath. All in order, descriptions nicely matched. The papers were handed back with profuse thanks. Roland next handed Avery a letter which he took from his wallet with some care. Avery handled it in the same fashion, his eyes growing wide as he saw the frank at the bottom. " 'Pon my soul, boys! 'Twas a gunslinger wrote this!"

"Aye, so it was," Cuthbert agreed in a voice of wonder. Roland kicked his ankle—hard—without taking his respectful eyes from Avery's face.

The letter above the frank was from one Steven Deschain of Gilead, a gunslinger (which was to say a knight, squire, peacemaker, and Baron . . . the last title having almost no meaning in the modern day, despite all John Farson's ranting) of the twenty-ninth generation descended from Arthur of Eld, on the side line of descent (the long-descended gel of one of Arthur's many gillies, in other words). To Mayor Hartwell Thorin, Chan-cellar Kimba Rimer, and High Sheriff Herkimer Avery, it sent greetings and recommended to their notice the three young men who delivered this document, Masters Dearborn, Stockworth, and Heath. These had been sent on special mission from the Affiliation to serve as counters of all materials which might serve the Affiliation in time of need (the word *war* was omitted from the document, but glowed between every line). Steven Deschain, on behalf of the Affiliation of Baronies, exhorted Misters Thorin, Rimer, and Avery to afford the Affiliation's nominated counters every help in their service, and to be particularly careful in the enumerations of all livestock, all supplies of food, and all forms of transport. Dear-born, Stockworth, and Heath would be in Mejis for at least three months, Deschain wrote, possibly as long as a year. The document finished by inviting any or all of the addressed public officials to "write us word of these young men and their deportment, in all detail as you shall imagine of interest to us." And, it begged, "Do not stint in this matter, if you love us." Tell us if they behaved themselves, in other words. Tell us if they've learned their lesson.

The deputy with the monocle came back while the High Sheriff was perusing this document. He carried a tray loaded with four glasses of white tea and bent down

with it like a butler. Roland murmured thanks and handed the glasses around. He took the last for himself, raised it to his lips, and saw Alain looking at him, his blue eyes bright in his stolid face.

Alain shook his glass slightly—just enough to make the ice tinkle—and Roland responded with the barest sliver of a nod. He had expected cool tea from a jug kept in a nearby springhouse, but there were actual chunks of ice in the glasses. Ice in high summer. It was interesting.

And the tea was, as promised, delicious.

Avery finished the letter and handed it back to Roland with the air of one passing on a holy relic. "Ye want to keep that safe about yer person, Will Dearborn—aye, very safe indeed!"

"Yes, sir." He tucked the letter and his identification back into his purse. His friends "Richard" and "Arthur" were doing the same.

"This is excellent white tea, sir," Alain said. "I've never had better."

"Aye," Avery said, sipping from his own glass. "'Tis the honey that makes it so fearsome. Eh, Dave?"

The deputy with (he monocle smiled from his place by the notice-board. "I believe so, but Judy don't like to say. She had the recipe from her mother."

"Aye, we must remember the faces of our mothers, too, so we must." Sheriff Avery looked sentimental for a moment, but Roland had an idea that the face of his mother was the furthest thing from the big man's mind just then. He turned to Alain, and sentiment was replaced by a surprising shrewdness.

"Ye're wondering about the ice, Master Stockworth."

Alain started. "Well, I..."

"Ye expected no such amenity in a backwater like Hambry, I'll war-rant," Avery said, and although there was a joshing quality on top of his voice, Roland thought there was something else entirely underneath.

*He doesn't like us. He doesn't like what he thinks of as our "city ways." He hasn't known us long enough to know what kind of ways we have, if any at all, but already he doesn't like them. He thinks we're a trio of snotnoses; that we see him and everyone else here as country bumpkins.*

"Not just Hambry," Alain said quietly. "Ice is as rare in the Inner Arc these days as anywhere else, Sheriff Avery. When I grew up, I saw it mostly as a special treat at birthday parties and such."

"There was always ice on Glowing Day," Cuthbert put in. He spoke with very un-Cuthbertian quiet. "Except for the fireworks, that's what we liked about it most."

"Is that so, is that so," Sheriff Avery said in an amazed, wonders-will-never-cease tone. Avery perhaps didn't like them riding in like this, didn't like having to take up what he would probably call "half the damn morning" with them; he didn't like their clothes, their fancy identification papers, their accents, or their youth. Least of all their youth. Roland could understand all that, but wondered if it was the whole story. If there was something else going on here, what was it?

"There's a gas-fired refrigerator and stove in the Town Gathering Hall," Avery said. "Both work. There's plenty of earth-gas out at Citgo—that's the oil patch east of town. Yer passed it on yer way in, I wot."

They nodded.

"Stove's nobbut a curiosity these days—a history lesson for the schoolchildren—but the refrigerator comes in handy, so it does." Avery held up his glass and looked through the side. "'Specially in summer."

He sipped some tea, smacked his lips, and smiled at Alain, "You see? No mystery."

"I'm surprised you haven't found use for the oil," Roland said. "No generators in town, Sheriff?"

"Aye, there be four or five," Avery said. "The biggest is out at Francis Lengyll's Rocking B ranch, and I recall when it useter run. It's HONDA. Do ye kennit that name, boys? HONDA?"

"I've seen it once or twice," Roland said, "on old motor-driven bicycles."

"Aye? In any case, none of the generators will run on the oil from the Citgo patch. Tis too thick. Tarry goo, is all. We have no refineries here."

"I see," Alain said. "In any case, ice in summer's a treat. However it comes to the glass." He let one of the chunks slip into his mouth, and crunched it between his teeth.

Avery looked at him a moment longer, as if to make sure the subject was closed, then switched his gaze back to Roland. His fat face was once more radiant with his broad, untrustworthy smile.

"Mayor Thorin has asked me to extend ye his very best greetings, and convey his regrets for not bein here today—very busy is our Lord Mayor, very busy indeed. But he's laid on a dinner-party at Mayor's House to-morrow evening—seven o' the

clock for most folk, eight for you young fellows ... so you can make a bit of an entrance, I imagine, add a touch o' drama, like. And I need not tell such as yourselves, who've probably at-tended more such parties than I've had hot dinners, that it would be best to arrive pretty much on the dot."

"Is *it fancy-dress?*" Cuthbert asked uneasily. "Because we've come a long way, almost four hundred wheels, and we didn't pack formal wear and sashes, none of us."

Avery was chuckling—more honestly this time, Roland thought, perhaps because he felt "Arthur" had displayed a streak of unsophistication and insecurity. "Nay, young master, Thorin understands ye've come to do a job—next door to workin cowboys, ye be! 'Ware they don't have ye out draggin nets in the bay next!" From the comer, Dave—the deputy with the monocle—honked unex-pected laughter. Perhaps it was the sort of joke you had to be local to understand, Roland thought.

"Wear the best ye have, and ye'll be fine. There'll be no one there in sashes, in any case—that's not how things are done in Hambry." Again

Roland was struck by the man's constant smiling denigration of his town ;iiul Barony . . . and the resentment of the outsiders which lay just be-neath it.

"In any case, ye'll find yerselves working more than playing tomor-row night, I imagine. Hart's invited all the large ranchers, stockliners, and livestock owners from this part of the Barony ... not that there's so many, you understand, bein as how Mejis is next door to desert once you get west o' the Drop. But everyone whose goods and chattel you've been sent to count will be there, and I think you'll find all of them loyal Affilia-tion men, ready and eager to help. There's Francis Lengyll of the Rocking B ... John Croydon of the Piano Ranch .. Henry Wertner, who's the Barony's stockliner as well as a horsebreeder in his own right . . . Hash Renfrew, who owns the Lazy Susan, the biggest horse-ranch in Mejis (not that it's much by the standards you fellows are used to, I wot) . . . and there'll be others, as well. Rimer'll introduce you, and get you about your business right smart."

Ronald nodded and turned to Cuthbert. "You'll want to be on your mettle tomorrow night."

Cuthbert nodded. "Don't fear me, Will, I'll note em all."

Avery sipped more tea, eyeing them over his glass with a roguish ex-pression so false it made Roland want to squirm.

"Most of em's got daughters of marriageable age, and they'll bring em. You boys want to look out."

Roland decided he'd had enough tea and hypocrisy for one morning. He nodded, emptied his glass, smiled (hoping his looked more genuine than Avery's now looked to him), and got to his feet. Cuthbert and Alain took the cue and did likewise.

"Thank you for the tea, and for the welcome," Roland said. "Please send a message to Mayor Thorin, thanking him for his kindness and telling him that he'll see us tomorrow, at eight o' the clock, prompt."

"Aye. So I will."

Roland then turned to Dave. That worthy was so surprised to be noticed again that he recoiled, almost bumping his head on the notice-board. "And please thank your wife for the tea. It was wonderful."

"I will. Thankee-sai."

They went back outside, High Sheriff Avery herding them along like a genial, overweight sheepdog.

"As to where you'll locate—" he began as they descended the steps and started down the walk. As soon as they hit the sunshine, he began to sweat.

"Oh, land, I forgot to ask you about that," Roland said, knocking the heel of his hand against his forehead. "We've camped out on that long slope, lots of horses as you go down the turf, I'm sure you know where I mean—"

"The Drop, aye."

"—but without permission, because we don't yet know who to ask."

"That'd be John Croydon's land, and I'm sure he wouldn't begrudge ye, but we mean to do ye better than that. There's a spread northwest of here, the Bar K. Used to b'long to the Garber family, but they gave it up and moved on after a fire. Now it b'longs to the Horsemen's Association—that's a little local group of farmers and ranchers. I spoke to Francis Lengyll about you fellows—he's the H.A. president just current—and he said 'We'll put em out to the old Garber place, why not?' "

"Why not?" Cuthbert agreed in a gentle, musing voice. Roland shot him a sharp glance, but Cuthbert was looking down at the harbor, where the small fishing boats skittered to and fro like waterbugs.

"Aye, just what I said, 'Why not, indeed?' I said. The home place burned to a cinder, but the bunkhouse still stands; so does the stable and the cook-shack next

door to it. On Mayor Thorin's orders, I've taken the liberty of stocking the larder and having the bunkhouse swept out and spruced up a little. Ye may see the occasional bug, but nothing that'll bite or sting . . . and no snakes, unless there's a few under the floor, and if there are, let em stay there's what I say. Hey, boys? Let em stay there!"

"Let em stay there, right under the floor where they're happy," Cuthbert agreed, still gazing down at the harbor with his arms folded over his chest.

Avery gave him a brief, uncertain glance, his smile flickering a bit at the comers. Then he turned back to Roland, and the smile shone out strongly once more.

"There's no holes in the roof, lad, and if it rains, ye'll be dry. What think ye of that? Does it sound well to ye?"

"Better than we deserve. I think that you've been very efficient and Mayor Thorin's been far too kind." And he *did* think that. The question was why. "But we appreciate his thoughtfulness. Don't we, boys?"

Cuthbert and Alain made vigorous assent.

"And we accept with thanks."

Avery nodded. "I'll tell him. Go safely, boys."

They had reached the hitching rail. Avery once more shook hands all around, this time saving his keenest looks for their horses.

"Until tomorrow night, then, young gents?"

"Tomorrow night," Roland agreed.

"Will ye be able to find the Bar K on your own, do yer think?"

Again Roland was struck by the man's unspoken contempt and un-conscious condescension. Yet perhaps it was to the good. If the High Sheriff thought they were stupid, who knew what might come of it?

"We'll find it," Cuthbert said, mounting up. Avery was looking suspiciously at the rook's skull on the horn of Cuthbert's saddle. Cuthbert saw him looking, but for once managed to keep his mouth shut. Roland was both amazed and pleased by this unexpected reticence. "Fare you well, Sheriff."

"And you, boy."

He stood there by the hitching post, a large man in a khaki shirt with sweat-stains around the armpits and black boots that looked too shiny for a working sheriff's feet. *And where's the horse that could support him through a day of range-riding?* Roland thought. *I'd like to see the cut of that Cayuse.*

Avery waved to them as they went. The other deputies came down the walk, Deputy Dave in the forefront. They waved, too.

3

The moment the Affiliation brats mounted on their fathers' expensive horse-flesh were around the comer and headed downhill to the High Street, the sheriff and the deputies stopped waving. Avery turned to Dave Hollis, whose expression of slightly stupid awe had been replaced by one marginally more intelligent.

"What think ye, Dave?"

Dave lifted his monocle to his mouth and began to nibble nervously at its brass edging, a habit about which Sheriff Avery had long since ceased to nag him. Even Dave's wife, Judy, had given up on that score, and Judy Hollis—Judy Wertner that was—was a fair engine when it came to getting her own way.

"Soft," Dave said. "Soft as eggs just dropped out of a chicken's ass."

"Mayhap," Avery said, putting his thumbs in his belt and rocking enormously back and forth, "but the one did most of the talking, him in the flathead hat, he doesn't *think* he's soft."

"Don't matter what he *thinks*," Dave said, still nibbling at his eye-glass. "He's in Hambry, now. He may have to change his way of thinking to our'n."

Behind him, the other deputies laughed. Even Avery smiled. They would leave the rich boys alone if the rich boys left them alone—those were orders, straight from Mayor's House—but Avery had to admit that he wouldn't mind a little dust-up with them, so he wouldn't. He would enjoy putting his boot into the balls of the one with that idiotic bird's skull on his saddle-horn—standing there and mocking him, he'd been, thinking all the while that Herk Avery was too country-dumb to know what he was up to—but the thing he'd *realty* enjoy would be beating the cool look from the eyes of the boy in the flathead preacher's hat, seeing a hotter expression of fear rise up in them as Mr. Will Dearborn of Hemphill realized that New Canaan was far away and his rich father couldn't help him.

"Aye," he said, clapping Dave on the shoulder. "Mayhap he'll have to change his way of thinking." He smiled—one very different from any of those he had shown the Affiliation counters. "Mayhap they all will."



The three boys rode in single file until they were past the Travellers' Rest (a young and obviously retarded man with kinky black hair looked up from scrubbing the brick stoop and waved to them; they waved back). Then they moved up abreast, Roland in the middle.

"What did you think of our new friend, the High Sheriff?" Roland asked.

"I have no opinion," Cuthbert said brightly. "No, none at all. Opinion is politics, and politics is an evil which has caused many a fellow to be hung while he's still young and pretty." He leaned forward and tapped the rook's skull with his knuckles. "The lookout didn't care for him, though. I'm sorry to say that our faithful lookout thought Sheriff Avery a fat bag of guts without a trustworthy bone in his body."

Roland turned to Alain. "And you, young Master Stockworth?"

Alain considered it for some time, as was his way, chewing a piece of grass he'd bent oversaddle to pluck from his side of the road. At last he said: "If he came upon us burning in the street, I don't think he'd piss on us to put us out."

Cuthbert laughed heartily at that. "And you, Will? How do you say, dear captain?"

"He doesn't interest me much ... but one thing he said does. Given that the horse-meadow they call the Drop has to be at least thirty wheels long and runs five or more to the dusty desert, how do you suppose Sher-iff Avery knew we were on the part of it that belongs to Croydon's Piano Ranch?"

They looked at him, first with surprise, then speculation. After a moment Cuthbert leaned forward and rapped once more on the rook's skull. "We're being watched, and you never reported it? No supper for you, sir, and it'll be the stockade the next time it happens!"

But before they had gone much farther, Roland's thoughts of Sheriff Avery gave way to more pleasant ones of Susan Delgado. He would see her the following night, of that he was sure. He wondered if her hair would be down. He couldn't wait to find out.

Now here they were, at Mayor's House. *Let the game begin*, Roland thought, not

clear on what that meant even as the phrase went through his mind, surely not thinking of Castles . . . not then.

The hostlers led their mounts away, and for a moment the three of them stood at the foot of the steps—huddled, almost, as horses do in un-friendly weather—their beardless faces washed by the light of the torches. From inside, the guitars played and voices were raised in a fresh eddy of laughter.

"Do we knock?" Cuthbert asked. "Or just open and march in?"

Roland was spared answering. The main door of the *had* was thrown open and two women stepped out, both wearing long white-collared dresses that reminded all three boys of the dresses stockmen's wives wore in their own part of the world. Their hair was caught back in snoods that sparkled with some bright diamondy stuff in the light of the torches.

The plumper of the two stepped forward, smiling, and dropped them a deep curtsy. Her earrings, which looked like square-cut firedims, flashed and bobbed.

"You are the young men from the Affiliation, so you are, and welcome you are, as well. Goodeven, sirs, and may your days be long upon the earth!"

They bowed in unison, boots forward, and thanked her in an unin-tended chorus that made her laugh and clap her hands. The tall woman be-side her offered them a smile as spare as her frame.

"I am Olive Thorin," the plump woman said, "the Mayor's wife. This is my sister-in-law, Coral."

Coral Thorin, still with that narrow smile (it barely creased her lips and touched her eyes not at all), dipped them a token curtsy. Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain bowed again over their outstretched legs.

"I welcome you to Seafrent," Olive Thorin said, her dignity leavened and made pleasant by her artless smile, her obvious dazzlement at the ap-pearance of her young visitors from In-World. "Come to our house with joy. I say so with all my heart, so I do."

"And so we will, madam," Roland said, "for your greeting has made us joyful." He took her hand, and, with no calculation whatever, raised it to his lips and kissed it. Her delighted laughter made him smile. He liked Olive Thorin on sight, and it was perhaps well he met someone of that sort early on, for, with the problematic exception of Susan Delgado, he met no one else he liked, no one else he trusted, all that night.

It was warm enough even with the seabreeze, and the cloak- and coat-collector in the foyer looked as though he'd had little or no custom. Roland wasn't entirely surprised to see that it was Deputy Dave, his re-maining bits of hair slicked back with some sort of gleaming grease and his monocle now lying on the snow-white breast of a houseman's jacket. Roland gave him a nod. Dave, his hands clasped behind his back, returned it.

Two men—Sheriff Avery and an elderly gent as gaunt as Old Doctor Death in a cartoon—came toward them. Beyond, through a pair of double doors now open wide, a whole roomful of people stood about with crystal punch-cups in their hands, talking and taking little bits of food from the trays which were circulating. Roland had time for just one narrow-eyed glance toward Cuthbert:

*Everything. Every name, every face . . . every nuance. Especially those.*

Cuthbert raised an eyebrow—his discreet version of a nod—and then Roland was pulled, willy-nilly, into the evening, his first real evening of service as a working gunslinger. And he had rarely worked harder.

Old Doctor Death turned out to be Kimba Rimer, Thorin's Chancellor and Minister of Inventory (Roland suspected the title had been made up special for their visit). He was easily five inches taller than Roland, who was considered tall in Gilead, and his skin was pale as candlewax. Not unhealthy-looking; just pale. Wings of iron-gray hair floated away from either side of his head, gossamer as cobwebs. The top of his skull was completely bald. Balanced on his whelk of a nose was a pince-nez.

"My boys!" he said, when the introductions had been made. He had the smooth, sadly sincere voice of a politician or an undertaker. "Welcome to Mejis! To Hambry! And to Seafront, our humble Mayor's House!"

"If this is humble, I should wonder at the palace your folk might build," Roland said. It was a mild enough remark, more pleasantry than witticism (he ordinarily left the wit to Bert), but Chancellor Rimer laughed hard. So did Sheriff Avery.

"Come, boys!" Rimer said, when he apparently felt he had expressed enough amusement. "The Mayor awaits you with impatience, I'm sure."

"Aye," said a timid voice from behind them. The skinny sister-in-law, Coral, had

disappeared, but Olive Thorin was still there, looking up at the newcomers with her hands decorously clasped before that area of her body which might once have been her waist. She was still smiling her hopeful, pleasant smile. "Very eager to meet you, Hart is, very eager, in-deed. Shall I conduct them, Kimba, or—" "Nay, nay, you mustn't trouble yourself with so many other guests to attend," Rimer said.

"I suppose you're right." She curtseyed to Roland and his companions a final time, and although she still smiled and although the smile looked completely genuine to Roland, he thought: *She's unhappy about something, all the same. Desperately so, I think.*

"Gentlemen?" Rimer asked. The teeth in his smile were almost disconcertingly huge. "Will ye come?"

He led them past the grinning Sheriff and into the reception hall.

7

Roland was hardly overwhelmed by it; he had, after all, been in the Great Hall of Gilead—the Hall of the Grandfathers, it was sometimes called—and had even peeped down on the great party which was held there each year, the so-called Dance of Easterling, which marked the end of Wide Earth and the advent of Sowing. There were five chandeliers in the Great Hall instead of just one, and lit with electric bulbs rather than oil lamps. The dress of the partygoers (many of them expensive young men and women who had never done a hand's turn of work in their lives, a fact of which John Farson spoke at every opportunity) had been richer, the music had been fuller, the company of older and nobler lines which grew closer and closer together as they stretched back toward Arthur Eld, he of the white horse and unifying sword.

Yet there was life here, and plenty of it. There was a robustness that had been missing in Gilead, and not just at Easterling, either. The texture he felt as he stepped into the Mayor's House reception room was the sort of thing, Roland reflected, that you didn't entirely miss when it was gone, because it slipped away quietly and painlessly. Like blood from a vein cut in a tub filled with hot water. The room—almost but not quite grand enough to be a hall—was circular, its panelled walls decorated by paintings (most quite bad) of previous Mayors. On a

raised stand to the right of the doors leading into the dining area, four grinning guitarists in *tati* jackets and sombreros were playing something that sounded like a waltz with pepper on it. In the center of the floor was a table supporting two cut-glass punchbowls, one vast and grand, the other smaller and plainer. The white-jacketed fellow in charge of the dipping-out operations was another of Avery's deputies.

Contrary to what the High Sheriff had told them the day before, several of the men were wearing sashes of various colors, but Roland didn't feel too out of place in his white silk shirt, black string tie, and one pair of stovepipe dress trousers. For every man wearing a sash, he saw three wearing the sort of dowdy, box-tailed coats that he associated with stock-men at church, and he saw several others (younger men, for the most part) who weren't wearing coats at all. Some of the women wore jewelry (though nothing so expensive as sai Thorin's firedim earrings), and few looked as if they'd missed many meals, but they also wore clothes Roland recognized: the long, round-collared dresses, usually with the lace fringe of a colored underskirt showing below the hem, the dark shoes with low heels, the snoods (most sparkling with gem-dust, as those of Olive and Coral Thorin had been).

And then he saw one who was very different.

It was Susan Delgado, of course, shimmering and almost too beautiful to look at in a blue silk dress with a high waist and a square-cut bodice which showed the tops of her breasts. Around her neck was a sapphire pendant that made Olive Thorin's earrings look like paste. She stood next to a man wearing a sash the color of coals in a hot woodfire. That deep orange-red was the Barony's color, and Roland supposed that the man was their host, but for the moment Roland barely saw him. His eye was held by Susan Delgado: the blue dress, the tanned skin, the triangles of color, too pale and perfect to be makeup, which ran lightly up her cheeks; most of all her hair, which was unbound tonight and fell to her waist like a shimmer of palest silk. He wanted her, suddenly and completely, with a desperate depth of feeling that felt like sickness. Everything he was and everything he had come for, it seemed, was secondary to her.

She turned a little, then, and spied him. Her eyes (they were gray, he saw) widened the tiniest bit. He thought that the color in her cheeks deepened a little. Her lips—lips that had touched his as they stood on a dark road, he thought with

wonder—parted a little. Then the man standing next to Thorin (also tall, also skinny, with a mustache and long white hair lying on the dark shoulders of his coat) said something, and she turned back to him. A moment later the group around Thorin was laughing, Susan included. The man with the white hair didn't join them, but smiled thinly.

Roland, hoping his face did not give away the fact that his heart was pounding like a hammer, was led directly to this group, which stood close to the punchbowls. Distantly, he could feel Rimer's bony confederation of fingers clamped to his arm above the elbow. More clearly he could smell mingled perfumes, the oil from the lamps on the walls, the aroma of the ocean. And thought, for no reason at all, *Oh, I am dying. I am dying.*

*Take hold of yourself, Roland of Gilead. Stop this foolishness, for your father's sake. Take hold!*

He tried ... to some degree succeeded. . . and knew he would be lost the next time she looked at him. It was her eyes. The other night, in the dark, he hadn't been able to see those fog-colored eyes. *I didn't know how lucky I was*, he thought wryly.

"Mayor Thorin?" Rimer asked. "May I present our guests from the Inner Baronies?"

Thorin turned away from the man with the long white hair and the woman standing next to him, his face brightening. He was shorter than his Chancellor but just as thin, and his build was peculiar: a short and narrow-shouldered upper body over impossibly long and skinny legs. He looked, Roland thought, like the sort of bird you should glimpse in a marsh at dawn, bobbing for its breakfast.

"Aye, you may!" he cried in a strong, high voice. "Indeed you may, we've been waiting with impatience, *great* impatience, for this moment! Well met we are, very well met! Welcome, sirs! May your evening in this house of which I am the fleeting proprietor be happy, and may your days be long upon the earth!"

Roland took the bony outstretched hand, heard the knuckles crack beneath his grip, looked for an expression of discomfort on the Mayor's face, and was relieved to see none. He bowed low over his outstretched leg.

"William Dearborn, Mayor Thorin, at your service. Thank you for your welcome, and may your own days be long upon the earth."

"Arthur Heath" made his manners next, then "Richard Stockworth." Thorin's smile widened at each deep bow. Rimer did his best to beam, but looked unused to it.

The man with the long white hair took a glass of punch, passed it to his female companion, and continued to smile thinly. Roland was aware that everyone in the room—the guests numbered perhaps fifty in all—was looking at them, but what he felt most upon his skin, beating like a soft wing, was *her* regard. He could see the blue silk of her dress from the side of one eye, but did not dare look at her more directly.

"Was your trip difficult?" Thorin was asking. "Did you have adventures and experience perils? We would hear all the details at dinner, so we would, for we have few guests from the Inner Arc these days." His eager, slightly fatuous smile faded; his tufted brows drew together. "Did ye encounter patrols of Farson?"

"No, Excellency," Roland said. "We—"

"Nay, lad, nay—no Excellency, I won't have it, and the fisherfolk and hossedroppers I serve wouldn't, even if I would. Just Mayor Thorin, if you please."

"Thank you. We saw many strange things on our journey, Mayor Thorin, but no Good Men."

"Good Men!" Rimer jerked out, and his upper lip lifted in a smile which made him look doglike. "Good Men, indeed!"

"We would hear it all, every word," Thorin said. "But before I forget my manners in my eagerness, young gentlemen, let me introduce you to these close around me. Kimba you've met; this formidable fellow to my left is Eldred Jonas, chief of my newly installed security staff." Thorin's smile looked momentarily embarrassed. "I'm not convinced that I need extra security, Sheriff Avery's always been quite enough to keep the peace in our corner of the world, but Kimba insists. And when Kimba insists, the Mayor must bow."

"Very wise, sir," Rimer said, and bowed himself. They all laughed, save for Jonas, who simply held onto his narrow smile.

Jonas nodded. "Pleased, gents, I'm sure." The voice was a reedy quaver. He then wished them long days upon the earth, all three, coming to Roland last in his round of handshaking. His grip was dry and firm, utterly untouched by the tremor in his voice. And now Roland noticed the queer blue shape tattooed on the back of the man's right hand, in the webbing between thumb and first finger. It looked like a coffin.

"Long days, pleasant nights," Roland said with hardly a thought. It was a greeting from his childhood, and it was only later that he would realize it was one more apt

to be associated with Gilead than with any such rural place as Hemphill. Just a small slip, but he was beginning to believe that their margin for such slips might be a good deal less than his father had thought when he had sent Roland here to get him out of Marten's way.

"And to you," Jonas said. His bright eyes measured Roland with a thoroughness that was close to insolence, still holding his hand. Then he released it and stepped back.

"Cordelia Delgado," Mayor Thorin said, next bowing to the woman who had been speaking to Jonas. As Roland also bowed in her direction, he saw the family resemblance . . . except that what looked generous and lovely on Susan's face looked pinched and folded on the face before him now. Not the girl's mother; Roland guessed that Cordelia Delgado was a bit too young for that.

"And our especial friend, Miss Susan Delgado," Thorin finished, sounding flustered (Roland supposed she would have that effect on any man, even an old one like the Mayor). Thorin urged her forward, bobbing his head and grinning, one of his knuckle-choked hands pressed against the small of her back, and Roland felt an instant of poisonous jealousy. Ridiculous, given this man's age and his plump, pleasant wife, but it was there, all right, and it was sharp. Sharp as a bee's ass, Cort would have said.

Then her face tilted up to his, and he was looking into her eyes again. He had heard of drowning in a woman's eyes in some poem or story, and thought it ridiculous. He still thought it ridiculous, but understood it was perfectly possible, nonetheless. And she knew it. He saw concern in her eyes, perhaps even fear.

*Promise me that if we meet at Mayor's House, we meet for the first time.*

The memory of those words had a sobering, clarifying effect, and seemed to widen his vision a little. Enough for him to be aware that the woman beside Jonas, the one who shared some of Susan's features, was looking at the girl with a mixture of curiosity and alarm.

He bowed low, but did little more than touch her ringless outstretched hand. Even so, he felt something like a spark jump between their fingers. From the momentary widening of those eyes, he thought that she felt it, too.

"Pleased to meet you, sai," he said. His attempt to be casual sounded tinny and false in his own ears. Still, he was begun, it felt like the whole world was watching



him (*them*), and there was nothing to do but go on with it. He tapped his throat three times. "May your days be long—"

"Aye, and yours, Mr. Dearborn. Thankee-sai."

She turned to Alain with a rapidity that was almost rude, then to Cuthbert, who bowed, tapped, then said gravely: "Might I recline briefly at your feet, miss? Your beauty has loosened my knees. I'm sure a few moments spent looking up at your profile from below, with the back of my head on these cool tiles, would put me right."

They all laughed at that—even Jonas and Miss Cordelia. Susan blushed prettily and slapped the back of Cuthbert's hand. For once Roland blessed his friend's relentless sense of foolery.

Another man joined the party by the punchbowl. This newcomer was blocky and blessedly un-thin in his boxtail coat. His cheeks burned with high color that looked like windburn rather than drink, and his pale eyes lay in nets of wrinkles. A rancher; Roland had ridden often enough with his father to know the look.

"There'll be maids a-plenty to meet you boys tonight," the newcomer said with a friendly enough smile. "Ye'll find y'selves drunk on perfume if ye're not careful. But I'd like my crack at you before you meet em. Fran Lengyll, at your service." His grip was strong and quick; no bowing or other nonsense went with it.

"I own the Rocking B ... or it owns me, whichever way ye want to look at it. I'm also boss of the Horsemen's Association, at least until they fire me. The Bar K was my idea. Hope it's all right."

"It's perfect, sir," Alain said. "Clean and dry and room for twenty. Thank you. You've been too kind."

"Nonsense," Lengyll said, looking pleased all the same as he knocked back a glass of punch. "We're all in this together, boy. John Farson's but one bad straw in a field of wrong-headedness these days. The world's moved on, folks say. Huh! So it has, aye, and a good piece down the road to hell is where it's moved on to. Our job is to hold the hay out of the furnace as well as we can, as long as we can. For the sake of our children even more than for that of our fathers."

"Hear, hear," Mayor Thorin said in a voice that strove for the high ground of solemnity and fell with a splash into fatuity instead. Roland noticed the scrawny old fellow was gripping one of Susan's hands (she seemed almost unaware of it; was looking intently at Lengyll instead), and suddenly he understood: the Mayor

was either her uncle or perhaps a cousin of some close degree. Lengyll ignored both, looking at the three newcomers instead, scrutinizing each in turn and finishing with Roland.

"Anything us in Mejis can do to help, lad, just ask—me, John Croydon, Hash Renfrew, Jake White, Hank Wertner, any or all. Ye'll meet em tonight, aye, their wives and sons and daughters as well, and ye need only ask. We may be a good piece out from the hub of New Canaan here, but we're strong for the Affiliation, all the same. Aye, very strong."

"Well spoken," Rimer said quietly.

"And now," Lengyll said, "we'll toast your arrival proper. And ye've had to wait too long already for a dip of punch. It's dry as dust ye must be."

He turned to the punchbowls and reached for the ladle in the larger and more ornate of the two, waving off the attendant, clearly wanting to honor them by serving them himself.

"Mr. Lengyll," Roland said quietly. Yet there was a force of command in that voice; Fran Lengyll heard it and turned.

"The smaller bowl is soft punch, is it not?"

Lengyll considered this, at first not understanding. Then his eyebrow went up. For the first time he seemed to consider Roland and the others not as living symbols of the Affiliation and the Inner Baronies, but as actual human beings. Young ones. Only boys, when you got right down to it.

"Aye?"

"Draw ours from that, if you'd be so kind." He felt all eyes upon them now. *Her* eyes particularly. He kept his own firmly fixed on the rancher, but his peripheral vision was good, and he was very aware that Jonas's thin smile had resurfaced. Jonas knew what this was about already. Roland supposed Thorin and Rimer did, as well. These country mice knew a lot. More than they should, and he would need to think about that carefully later. It was the least of his concerns at the current moment, however.

"We have forgotten the faces of our fathers in a matter that has some bearing on our posting to Hambry." Roland was uncomfortably aware that he was now making a speech, like it or not. It wasn't the whole room he was addressing—thank the gods for little blessings—but the circle of listeners had grown well beyond the original group. Yet there was nothing for it but to finish;

the boat was launched. "I needn't go into details—nor would you expect them, I know—but I should say that we promised not to indulge in spirits during our time here. As penance, you see."

Her gaze. He could still feel it on his skin, it seemed.

For a moment there was complete quiet in the little group around the punchbowls, and then Lengyll said: "Your father would be proud to hear ye speak so frank, Will Dearborn—aye, so he would. And what boy worth his salt didn't get up to a little noise 'n wind from time to time?" He clapped Roland on the shoulder, and although the grip of his hand was firm and his smile looked genuine, his eyes were hard to read, only gleams of speculation deep in those beds of wrinkles. "In his place, may I be proud for him?"

"Yes," Roland said, smiling in return. "And with my thanks."

"And mine," Cuthbert said.

"Mine as well," Alain said quietly, taking the offered cup of soft punch and bowing to Lengyll.

Lengyll filled more cups and handed them rapidly around. Those already holding cups found them plucked away and replaced with fresh cups of the soft punch. When each of the immediate group had one, Lengyll turned, apparently intending to offer the toast himself. Rimer tapped him on the shoulder, shook his head slightly, and cut his eyes toward the Mayor. That worthy was looking at them with his eyes rather popped and his jaw slightly dropped. To Roland he looked like an en-thrilled playgoer in a penny seat; all he needed was a lapful of orange-peel. Lengyll followed the Chancellor's glance and then nodded.

Rimer next caught the eye of the guitar player standing at the center of the musicians. He stopped playing; so did the others. The guests looked that way, then back to the center of the room when Thorin began speak-ing. There was nothing ridiculous about his voice when he put it to use as he now did—it was carrying and pleasant.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my friends," he said. "I would ask you to help me in welcoming three *new* friends—young men from the Inner Bar-onies, fine young men who have dared great distances and many perils on behalf of the Affiliation, and in the service of order and peace."

Susan Delgado set her punch-cup aside, retrieved her hand (with some difficulty) from her uncle's grip, and began to clap. Others joined in. The applause which

swept the room was brief but warm. Eldred Jonas did not, Roland noticed, put his cup aside to join in.

Thorin turned to Roland, smiling. He raised his cup. "May I set you on with a word, Will Dearborn?"

"Aye, so you may, and with thanks," Roland said. There was laughter and fresh applause at his usage.

Thorin raised his cup even higher. Everyone else in the room followed suit; crystal gleamed like starpoints in the light of the chandelier.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you William Dearborn of Hemphill, Richard Stockworth of Pennilton, and Arthur Heath of Gilead."

Gasps and murmurs at that last, as if their Mayor had announced Arthur Heath of Heaven.

"Take of them well, give to them well, make their days in Mejis sweet, and their memories sweeter. Help them in their work and to advance the causes which are so dear to all of us. May their days be long upon the earth. So says your Mayor." "*SO SAY WE ALL!*" they thundered back.

Thorin drank; the rest followed his example. There was fresh applause. Roland turned, helpless to stop himself, and found Susan's eyes again at once. For a moment she looked at him fully, and in her frank gaze he saw that she was nearly as shaken by his presence as he was by hers. Then the older woman who looked like her bent and murmured something into her ear. Susan turned away, her face a composed mask . . . but he had seen her regard in her eyes. And thought again that what was done might be undone, and what was spoken might be unspoken.

## 8

As they passed into the dining hall, which had tonight been set with four long trestle tables (so close there was barely room to move between them), Cordelia tugged her niece's hand, pulling her back from the Mayor and Jonas, who had fallen into conversation with Fran Lengyll.

"Why looked you at him so, miss?" Cordelia whispered furiously. The vertical line had appeared on her forehead. Tonight it looked as deep as a trench. "What ails thy pretty, stupid head?" *Thy*. Just that was enough to tell Susan that her aunt was in a fine rage.

"Looked at who? And how?" Her tone sounded right, she thought, but oh, her heart—

The hand over hers clamped down, hurting. "Play no fiddle with me, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty! Have ye ever seen that fine-turned row of pins before? Tell me the truth!"

"No, how could I? Aunt, you're hurting me."

Aunt Cord smiled balefully and clamped down harder. "Better a small hurt now than a large one later. Curb your impudence. And curb your flirtatious eyes."

"Aunt, I don't know what you—"

"I think you do," Cordelia said grimly, pressing her niece close to the wood panelling to allow the guests to stream past them. When the rancher who owned the boathouse next to theirs said hello, Aunt Cord smiled pleasantly at him and wished him goodeven before turning back to Susan.

"Mind me, miss—mind me well. If I saw yer cow's eyes, ye may be sure that half the company saw. Well, what's done is done, but it stops now. Your time for such child-maid games is over. Do you understand?"

Susan was silent, her face setting in those stubborn lines Cordelia hated most of all; it was an expression that always made her feel like slap-ping her headstrong niece until her nose bled and her great gray doe's eyes gushed tears.

"Ye've made a vow and a contract. Papers have been passed, the weird-woman has been consulted, money has changed hands. *And ye've given your promise.* If that means nothing to such as yerself, girl, remem-ber what it'd mean to yer father."

Tears rose in Susan's eyes again, and Cordelia was glad to see them. Her brother had been an improvident irritation, capable of producing only this far too pretty womanchild ... but he had his uses, even dead.

"Now promise ye'll keep yer eyes to yourself, and that if ye see that boy coming, ye'll swing wide—aye, wide's you can—to stay out of his way."

"I promise. Aunt," Susan whispered. "I do."

Cordelia smiled. She was really quite pretty when she smiled. "It's well, then. Let's go in. We're being looked at. Hold my arm, child!"

Susan clasped her aunt's powdered arm. They entered the room side by side, their dresses rustling, the sapphire pendant on the swell of Susan's breast flashing, and many there were who remarked upon how alike they looked, and how well pleased poor old Pat Delgado would have been with them.

Roland was seated near the head of the center table, between Hash Ren-frew (a rancher even bigger and blockier than Lengyll) and Thorin's rather morose sister, Coral. Renfrew had been handy with the punch; now, as the soup was brought to table, he set about proving himself equally adept with the ale.

He talked about the fishing trade ("not what it useter be, boy, al-though it's less muties they pull up in their nets these days, 'n that's a blessin"), the farming trade ("folks round here can grow most anythin, long's it's corn or beans"), and finally about those things clearly closest to his heart: horsin, coursin, and ranchin. Those businesses went on as al-ways, aye, so they did, although times had been hard in the grass-and-sea-coast Baronies for forty year or more.

Weren't the bloodlines clarifying? Roland asked. For they had begun to do so where he came from.

Aye, Renfrew agreed, ignoring his potato soup and gobbling barbe-cued beef-strips instead. These he scooped up with a bare hand and washed down with more ale. Aye, young master, bloodlines was clarify-ing wonderful well, indeed they were, three colts out of every five were threaded stock—in thoroughbred as well as common lines, kennit—and the fourth could be kept and worked if not bred. Only one in five these days born with extra legs or extra eyes or its guts on the outside, and that was good. But the birthrates were way down, so they were; the stallions had as much ram as ever in their ramrods, it seemed, but not as much powder and ball.

"Beggin your pardon, ma'am," Renfrew said, leaning briefly across Roland to Coral Thorin. She smiled her thin smile (it reminded Roland of Jonas's), trudged her spoon through her soup, and said nothing. Renfrew emptied his ale-cup, smacked his lips heartily, and held the cup out again. As it was recharged, he turned back to Roland.

Things weren't good, not as they once had been, but they could be worse. *Would* be worse, if that bugger Farson had his way. (This time he didn't bother excusing himself to sai Thorin.) They all had to pull to-gether, that was the ticket—rich and poor, great and small, while pulling could still do some good. And then he seconded Lengyll, telling Roland that whatever he and his friends wanted,

whatever they needed, they had only to name it.

"Information should be enough," Roland said. "Numbers of things."

"Aye, can't be a counter without numbers," Renfrew agreed, and sprayed beery laughter. On Roland's left hand, Coral Thorin nibbled a bit of green (the beef-strips she had not so much as touched), smiled her narrow smile, and went on boating with her spoon. Roland guessed there was nothing wrong with her ears, though, and that her brother might get a complete report of their conversation. Or possibly it would be Rimer to get the report. For, while it was too early to say for sure, Roland had an idea that Rimer might be the real force here. Along, perhaps, with sai Jonas.

"For instance," Roland said, "how many riding horses do you think we may be able to report back to the Affiliation?"

"Tithe or total?"

"Total."

Renfrew put his cup down and appeared to calculate. As he did, Roland looked across the table and saw Lengyll and Henry Wertner, the Barony's stockliner, exchange a quick glance. They had heard. And he saw something else as well, when he returned his attention to his seatmate: Hash Renfrew was drunk, but likely not as drunk as he wanted young Will Dearborn to believe.

"Total, ye say—not just what we owe the Affiliation, or might be able to send along in a pinch."

"Yes."

"Well, let's see, young sai. Fran must run a hundred'n forty head; John Croydon's got near a hundred. Hank Wertner's got forty on his own hook, and must run sixty more out along the Drop for the Barony. Gov'mint hossflesh, Mr. Dearborn."

Roland smiled. "I know it well. Split hoofs, low necks, no speed, bot-tomless bellies."

Renfrew laughed hard at that, nodding . . . but Roland found himself wondering if the man was really amused. In Hambry, the waters on top and the waters down below seemed to run in different directions.

"As for myself, I've had a bad ten or twelve year—sand-eye, brain fever, cabbards. At one time there was two hundred head of running horses out there on the Drop with the Lazy Susan brand on em; now there can't be more than eighty."

Roland nodded. "So we're speaking of four hundred and twenty head."

"Oh, more'n that," Renfrew said with a laugh. He went to pick up his ale-cup, struck it with the side of one work- and weather-reddened hand, knocked it over, cursed, picked it up, then cursed the aleboy who came slow to refill it.

"More than that?" Roland prompted, when Renfrew was finally cocked and locked and ready to resume action.

"Ye have to remember, Mr. Dearborn, that this is hoss-country more than it's fisher-country. We josh each other, we and the fishers, but there's many a scale-scraper got a nag put away behind his house, or in the Barony stables if they have no roof of their own to keep the rain off a boss's head. 'Twas her poor da useter keep the Barony stables."

Renfrew nodded toward Susan, who was seated across and three seats up from Roland himself—just a table's turn from the Mayor, who was, of course, seated at the head. Roland found her placement there passing pe-culiar, especially given the fact that the Mayor's missus had been seated almost all the way at the far end of the table, with Cuthbert on one side of her and some rancher to whom they had not yet been introduced on her other.

Roland supposed an old fellow like Thorin might like to have a pretty young relation near at hand to help draw attention to him, or to cheer up his own eye, but it still seemed odd. Almost an insult to one's wife. If he was tired of her conversation, why not put her at the head of another table?

*They have their own customs, that's all, and the customs of the coun-try aren't your concern. This man's crazy horse-count is your concern.*

"How many other running horses, would you say?" he asked Ren-frew. "In all?" Renfrew gazed at him shrewdly. "An honest answer'll not come back to haunt me, will it, sonny? I'm an Affiliation man—so I am, Affiliation to the core, they'll carve Excalibur on my gravehead, like as not—but I'd not see Hambry and Mejis stripped of all its treasure."

"That won't happen, sai. How could we force you to give up what you don't want to in any case? Such forces as we have are all committed in the north and west, against the Good Man."

Renfrew considered this, then nodded.

"And may I not be Will to you?"

Renfrew brightened, nodded, and offered his hand a second time. He grinned broadly when Roland this time shook it in both of his, the over-and-under grip



preferred by drovers and cowboys.

"These're bad times we live in, Will, and they've bred bad manners. I'd guess there are probably another hundred and fifty head of horse in and about Mejis. Good ones is what I mean."

"Big-hat stock."

Renfrew nodded, clapped Roland on the back, ingested a goodly quaff of ale. "Big-hats, aye."

From the top of their table there came a burst of laughter. Jonas had apparently said something funny. Susan laughed without reservation, her head tilted back and her hands clasped before the sapphire pendant. Cordelia, who sat with the girl on her left and Jonas on her right, was also laughing. Thorin was absolutely convulsed, rocking back and forth in his chair, wiping his eyes with a napkin.

"Yon's a lovely girl," Renfrew said. He spoke almost reverently. Roland could not quite swear that a small sound—a womanly *hmmpf*, perhaps—had come from his other side. He glanced in that direction and saw sai Thorin still sporting with her soup. He looked back toward the head of the table.

"Is the Mayor her uncle, or perhaps her cousin?" Roland asked.

What happened next had a heightened clarity in his memory, as if someone had turned up all the colors and sounds of the world. The velvet swags behind Susan suddenly seemed a brighter red; the caw of laughter which came from Coral Thorin was the sound of a breaking branch. It was surely loud enough to make everyone in the vicinity stop their conversations and look at her, Roland thought. . . except only Renfrew and the two ranchers across the table did.

"Her *uncle!*" It was her first conversation of the evening. "Her *uncle*, that's good. Eh, Rennie?"

Renfrew said nothing, only pushed his ale-cup away and finally began to eat his soup.

"I'm surprised at ye, young man, so I am. Ye may be from the In-World, but oh goodness, whoever tended to your education of the *real* world—the one outside of books 'n maps—stopped a mite short, I'd say. She's his—" And then a word so thick with dialect that Roland had no idea what it was. *Seefin*, it sounded, or perhaps *sheevin*.

"I beg pardon?" He was smiling, but the smile felt cold and false on his mouth. There was a heaviness in his belly, as if the punch and the soup and the single beef-

strip he had eaten for politeness' sake had all lumped together in his stomach. *Do you serve?* he'd asked her, meaning did she serve at table. Mayhap she *did* serve, but likely she did it in a room rather more private than this. Suddenly he wanted to hear no more; had not the slightest interest in the meaning of the word the Mayor's sister had used.

Another burst of laughter rocked the top of the table. Susan laughed with her head back, her cheeks glowing, her eyes sparkling. One strap of her dress had slipped down her arm, disclosing the tender hollow of her shoulder. As he watched, his heart full of fear and longing, she brushed it absently back into place with the palm of her hand.

"It means 'quiet little woman,' " Renfrew said, clearly uncomfortable. "It's an old term, not used much these days—"

"Stop it, Rennie," said Coral Thorin. Then, to Roland: "He's just an old cowboy, and can't quit shovelling horseshit even when he's away from his beloved nags. *Sheevin* means side-wife. In the time of my great-grandmother, it meant whore . . . but one of a certain kind." She looked with a pale eye at Susan, who was now sipping ale, then turned back to Roland. There was a species of baleful amusement in her gaze, an expression that Roland liked little. "The kind of whore you had to pay for in coin, the kind too fine for the trade of simple folk."

"She's his gilly?" Roland asked through lips which felt as if they had been iced.

"Aye," Coral said. "Not consummated, not until the Reap—and none too happy about that is my brother, I'll warrant—but bought and paid for just as in the old days. So she is." Coral paused, then said, "Her father would die of shame if he could see her." She spoke with a kind of melancholy satisfaction.

"I hardly think we should judge the Mayor too harshly," Renfrew said in an embarrassed, pontificating voice.

Coral ignored him. She studied the line of Susan's jaw, the soft swell of her bosom above the silken edge of her bodice, the fall of her hair. The thin humor was gone from Coral Thorin's face. In it now was a somehow chilling species of contempt. In spite of himself, Roland found himself imagining the Mayor's knuckle-bunchy hands pushing down the straps of Susan's dress, crawling over her naked shoulders, plunging like gray crabs into the cave beneath her hair. He looked away, toward the table's lower end, and what he saw there was no better. It was Olive Thorin that his eye found—Olive, who had been relegated to the foot of the

table, Olive, looking up at the laughing folk who sat at its head. Looking up at her husband, who had re-placed her with a beautiful young girl, and gifted that girl with a pendant which made her own firedim earrings look dowdy by comparison. There was none of Coral's hatred and angry contempt on her face. Looking at her might have been easier if that were so. She only gazed at her husband with eyes that were humble, hopeful, and unhappy. Now Roland understood why he had thought her sad. She had every reason to be sad.

More laughter from the Mayor's party; Rimer had leaned over from the next table, where he was presiding, to contribute some witticism. It must have been a good one. This time even Jonas was laughing. Susan put a hand to her bosom, then took her napkin and raised it to wipe a tear of laughter from the corner of her eye. Thorin covered her other hand. She looked toward Roland and met his eyes, still laughing. He thought of Olive Thorin, sitting down there at the foot of the table, with the salt and spices, an untouched bowl of soup before her and that unhappy smile on her face. Seated where the girl could see her, as well. And he thought that, had he been wearing his guns, he might well have drawn one and put a bullet in Susan Delgado's cold and whoring little heart.

And thought: *Who do you hope to fool?*

Then one of the serving boys was there, putting a plate of fish in front of him. Roland thought he had never felt less like eating in his life . . . but he *would* eat, just the same, just as he would turn his mind to the questions raised by his conversation with Hash Renfrew of the Lazy Susan Ranch. He would remember the face of his father.

*Yes, I'll remember it very well, he thought. If only I could forget the one above you sapphire.*



## 10

The dinner was interminable, and there was no escape afterward. The table at the center of the reception room had been removed, and when the guests came back that way—like a tide which has surged as high as it can and now ebbs—they formed two adjacent circles at the direction of a sprightly little redhaired man whom Cuthbert later dubbed Mayor Thorin's Minister of Fun.

The boy-girl, boy-girl, boy-girl circling was accomplished with much laughter and some difficulty (Roland guessed that about three-quarters of the guests were now

fairly well shotted), and then the guitarists struck up a *quesa*. This proved to be a simple sort of reel. The circles revolved in opposite directions, all holding hands, until the music stopped for a moment. Then the couple created at the place where the two circles touched danced at the center of the female partner's circle, while everyone else clapped and cheered.

The lead musician managed this old and clearly well-loved tradition with a keen eye to the ridiculous, stopping his *muchachos* in order to create the most amusing couples: tall woman-short man, fat woman-skinny man, old woman-young man (Cuthbert ended up side-kicking with a woman as old as his great-granddame, to the sai's breathless cackles and the company's general roars of approval).

Then, just when Roland was thinking this stupid dance would never end, the music stopped and he found himself facing Susan Delgado.

For a moment he could do nothing but stare at her, feeling that his eyes must burst from their sockets, feeling that he could move neither of his stupid feet. Then she raised her arms, the music began, the circle (this one included Mayor Thorin and the watchful, narrowly smiling Eldred Jonas) applauded, and he led her into the dance.

At first, as he spun her through a figure (his feet moved with all their usual grace and precision, numb or not), he felt like a man made of glass. Then he became aware of her body touching his, and the rustle of her dress, and he was all too human again.

She moved closer for just a moment, and when she spoke, her breath tickled in his ear. He wondered if a woman could drive you mad—literally mad. He wouldn't have believed so before tonight, but tonight everything had changed.

"Thank you for your discretion and your propriety," she whispered.

He pulled back from her a little and at the same time twirled her, his hand against the small of her back—palm resting on cool satin, fingers touching warm skin. Her feet followed his with never a pause or stutter; they moved with perfect grace, unafraid of his great and booted clod-stompers even in their flimsy silk slippers.

"I can be discreet, sai," he said. "As for propriety? I'm amazed you even know the word."

She looked up into his cold face, her smile fading. He saw anger come in to fill it, but before anger there was hurt, as if he had slapped her. He felt both glad and sorry at the same time.

"Why do you speak so?" she whispered.

The music stopped before he could answer ... although how he might have answered, he had no idea. She curtseyed and he bowed, while those surrounding them clapped and whistled. They went back to their places, to their separate circles, and the guitars began again. Roland felt his hands grasped on either side and began to turn with the circle once more.

Laughing. Kicking. Clapping on the beat. Feeling her somewhere behind him, doing the same. Wondering if she wanted as badly as he did to be out of here, to be in the dark, to be alone in the dark, where he could put his false face aside before the real one beneath could grow hot enough to set it afire.

## CHAPTER VI

### sheemie

1

Around ten o' the clock, the trio of young men from the Inner Baronies made their manners to host and hostess, then slipped off into the fragrant summer night. Cordelia Delgado, who happened to be standing near Henry Wertner, the Barony's stockliner, remarked that they must be tired. Wertner laughed at this and replied in an accent so thick it was almost comic: "Nay, ma'am, byes that age're like rats explorin en woodpile after hokkut rain, so they are. It'll be hours yet before the bunks out'ta Bar K sees em."

Olive Thorin left the public rooms shortly after the boys, pleading a headache. She was pale enough to be almost believable.

By eleven, the Mayor, his Chancellor, and the chief of his newly in-augurated

security staff were conversing in the Mayor's study with the last few late-staying guests (all ranchers, all members of the Horsemen's Association). The talk was brief but intense. Several of the ranchers present expressed relief that the Affiliation's emissaries were so young. Eldred Jonas said nothing to this, only looked down at his pale, long-fingered hands and smiled his narrow smile. By midnight, Susan was at home and undressing for bed. She didn't have the sapphire to worry about, at least; that was a Barony jewel, and had been tucked back into the strongbox at Mayor's House before she left, despite what Mr. Ain't-We-Fine Will Dearborn might think about it and her. Mayor Thorin (she couldn't bring herself to call him Hart, although he had asked her to do so—not even to herself could she do it) had taken it back from her himself. In the hallway just off from the reception room, that had been, by the tapestry showing Arthur Eld carrying his sword out of the pyramid in which it had been entombed. And he (Thorin, not the Eld) had taken the opportunity to kiss her mouth and have a quick fumble at her breasts—a part of her that had felt much too naked during that entire interminable evening. "I burn for Reaping," he had whispered melodramatically in her ear. His breath had been redolent of brandy. "Each day of this summer seems an age."

Now, in her room, brushing her hair with harsh, quick strokes and looking out at the waning moon, she thought she had never been so angry in her life as she was at this moment: angry at Thorin, angry at Aunt Cord, *furious* with that self-righteous prig of a Will Dearborn. Most of all, however, she was angry at herself. "There's three things ye can do in any situation, girl," her father had told her once. "Ye can decide to do a thing, ye can decide *not* to do a thing ... or ye can decide not to decide." That last, her da had never quite come out and said (he hadn't needed to) was the choice of weaklings and fools. She had promised herself she would never elect it herself. . . and yet she had allowed herself to drift into this ugly situation. Now all the choices seemed bad and honorless, all the roads either filled with rocks or hub-deep in mud.

In her room at Mayor's House (she had not shared a chamber with Hart for ten years, or a bed, even briefly, for five), Olive sat in a night-dress of undecorated white cotton, also looking out at the waning moon. After closing herself into this safe and private place, she had wept. . . but not for long. Now she was dry-eyed, and felt as hollow as a dead tree.

And what was the worst? That Hart didn't understand how humiliated she was, and not just for herself. He was too busy strutting and preening (also too busy trying to look down the front of sai Delgado's dress at every opportunity) to know that people—his own Chancellor among them—were laughing at him behind his back. That might stop when the girl had returned to her aunt's with a big belly, but that wouldn't be for months yet. The witch had seen to that. It would be even longer if the girl kindled slowly. And what was the silliest, most humiliating thing of all? That she, John Haverty's daughter Olive, still loved her husband. Hart was an overweening, vainglorious, prancing loon of a man, but she still loved him. There was something else, something quite apart from the matter of Hart's turning into George o' Goats in his late middle age: she thought there was an intrigue of some sort going on, something dangerous and quite likely dishonorable. Hart knew a little about it, but she guessed he knew only what Kimba Rimer and that hideous limping man *wanted* him to know.

There was a time, and not so long ago, when Hart wouldn't have allowed himself to be fobbed off in such fashion by the likes of Rimer, a time when he would have taken one look at Eldred Jonas and his friends and sent them west ere they had so much as a single hot dinner in them. But that was before Hart had become besotted with sai Delgado's gray eyes. high bosom, and flat belly.

Olive turned down the lamp, blew out the flame, and crept off to bed, where she would lie wakeful until dawn.

By one o' the clock, no one was left in the public rooms of Mayor's House except for a quartet of cleaning women, who performed their chores silently (and nervously) beneath the eye of Eldred Jonas. When one of them looked up and saw him gone from the window-seat where he had been sitting and smoking, she murmured softly to her friends, and they all loosened up a little. But there was no singing, no laughter. *Il spec-tra*, the man with the blue coffin on his hand, might only have stepped hack into the shadows. He might still be watching.

By two o' the clock, even the cleaning women were gone. It was an hour at which a party in Gilead would just have been reaching its apogee of glitter and gossip, but Gilead was far away, not just in another Barony hut almost in another world. This was the Outer Arc, and in the Outers, even gentry went to bed early.

There was no gentry on view at the Travellers' Rest, however, and beneath the all-encompassing gaze of The Romp, the night was still fairly young.



At one end of the saloon, fishermen still wearing their rolled-down boots drank and played Watch Me for small stakes. To their right was a poker table; to their left, a knot of yelling, exhorting men—cowpokes, mostly—stood along Satan's Alley, watching the dice bounce down the velvet in-cline. At the room's other end, Sheb McCurdy was pounding out jagged boogie, right hand flying, left hand pumping, the sweat pouring down his neck and pale cheeks. Beside and above him, standing drunk on a stool, Pettie the Trotter shook her enormous bottom and bawled out the words to the song at the top of her voice: "*Come on over, baby, we got chicken in the hum, what hum. whose barn, my burn! Come on over, baby, baby got the bull by the horns ...*"

Sheemie stopped beside the piano, the camel bucket in one hand, grinning up at her and attempting to sing along. Pettie swatted him on his way, never missing a word, bump, or grind, and Sheemie went with his peculiar laugh, which was shrill but somehow not unpleasant.

A game of darts was in progress; in a booth near the back, a whore who styled herself Countess Jillian of Up'ard Killian (exiled royalty from distant Garlan, my dears, oh how special we are) was managing to give two handjobs at the same time while smoking a pipe. And at the bar, a whole line of assorted toughs, drifters, cowpunchers, drovers, drivers, carters, wheelwrights, stagies, carpenters, conmen, stockmen, boatmen, and gunmen drank beneath The Romp's double head. The only *real* gunmen in the place were at the end of the bar, a pair drinking by themselves. No one attempted to join them, and not just because they wore shooting irons in holsters that were slung low and tied down gunslinger fashion. Guns were uncommon but not unknown in Mejis at that time, and not necessarily feared, but these two had the sullen look of men who have spent a long day doing work they didn't want to do—the look of men who would pick a fight on no account at all, and be glad to end their day by sending some new widow's husband home in a hurry-up wagon.

Stanley the bartender served them whiskey after whiskey with no attempt to make conversation, not so much as a "Hot day, gents, wa'n't it?" They reeked of sweat, and their hands were pitchy with pine-gum. Not enough to keep Stanley from

being able to see the blue coffin-shapes tat-toed on them, though. Their friend, the old limping buzzard with the girl's hair and the gimp leg, wasn't here, at least. In Stanley's view, Jonas was easily the worst of the Big Coffin Hunters, but these two were bad enough, and he had no intention of getting aslant of them if he could help it. With luck, no one would; they looked tired enough to call it a night early. Reynolds and Depape were tired, all right—they had spent the day out at Citgo, camouflaging a line of empty steel tankers with nonsense words (texaco, citgo, sunoco, exxon) printed on their sides, a billion pine-boughs they'd hauled and stacked, it seemed—but they had no consequent plans to finish their drinking early. Depape might have done so if Her Nibs had been available, but that young beauty (actual name: Gert Moggins) had a ranch-job and wouldn't be back until two nights hence. "And it'll be a week if there's hard cash on offer," Depape said morosely. He pushed his spectacles up on his nose.

"Fuck her," Reynolds said.

"That's just what I'd do if I could, but I can't."

"I'm going to get me a plate of that free lunch," Reynolds said, pointing down to the other end of the bar, where a tin bucket of steamed clams had just come out of the kitchen. "You want some?"

"Them look like hocks of snot and go down the same way. Bring me a strip of beef jerky."

"All right, partner." Reynolds went off down the bar. People gave him wide passage; gave even his silk-lined cloak wide passage.

Depape, more morose than ever now that he had thought of Her Nibs gobbling cowboy spareribs out there at the Piano Ranch, downed his drink, winced at the stench of pine-gum on his hand, then held his glass out in Stanley Ruiz's direction. "Fill this up, you dog!" he shouted. A cowhand leaning with his back, butt, and elbows against the bar jerked forward at the sound of Depape's bellow, and that was all it took to start trouble.

Sheemie was bustling toward the pass through from which the steam-ers had just appeared, now holding the camel bucket out before him in both hands. Later, when the Travellers' began to empty out, his job would be to clean up. For now, however, it was simply to circulate with the camel bucket, dumping in every unfinished drink he found. This combined elixir ended up in a jug behind the bar. The jug was labelled fairly enough—camel piss—and a double shot could be

obtained for three pen-nies. It was a drink only for the reckless or the impecunious, but a fair number of both passed beneath the stem gaze of The Romp each night; Stanley rarely had a problem emptying the jug. And if it wasn't empty at the end of the night, why, there was always a fresh night coming along. Not to mention a fresh supply of thirsty fools.

But on this occasion Sheemie never made it to the Camel Piss jug be-hind the end of the bar. He tripped over the boot of the cowboy who had jerked forward, and went to his knees with a grunt of surprise. The con-tents of the bucket sloshed out ahead of him, and, following Satan's First Law of Malignity—to wit, if the worst can happen, it usually will—they drenched Roy Depape from the knees down in an eye watering mixture of beer, *graf*, and white lightning.

Conversation at the bar stopped, and that stopped the talk of the men gathered around the dice-chute. Sheb turned, saw Sheemie kneeling be-fore one of Jonas's men, and stopped playing. Pettie, her eyes squeezed shut as she poured her entire soul into her singing, continued on a capella for three or four bars before registering the silence which was spreading out like a ripple. She stopped singing and opened her eyes. That sort of si-lence usually meant that someone was going to be killed. If so, she didn't intend to miss it.

Depape stood perfectly still, inhaling the raw stench of alcohol as it rose. He didn't mind the smell; on the whole, it had the stink of pine-gum beat six ways to the Peddler. He didn't mind the way his pants were stick-ing to his knees, either. It might have been a bit of an irritation if some of that joy-juice had gotten down inside his boots, but none had.

His hand fell to the butt of his gun. Here, by god and by goddess, was something to take his mind off his sticky hands and absent whore. And good entertainment was ever worth a little wetting.

Silence blanketed the place now. Stanley stood as stiff as a soldier be-hind the bar, nervously plucking at one of his arm-garters. At the bar's other end, Reynolds looked back toward his partner with bright interest. He took a clam from the steaming bucket and cracked it on the edge of the bar like a boiled egg. At Depape's feet, Sheemie looked up, his eyes big and fearful beneath the wild snarl of his black hair. He was trying his best to smile.

"Well now, boy," Depape said. "You have wet me considerable."

"Sorry, big fella, I go trippy-trip." Sheemie jerked a hand back over his shoulder; a

little spray of camel piss flew from the tips of his fingers. Somewhere someone cleared his throat nervously—*raa-aach!* The room was full of eyes, and quiet enough so that they all could hear both the wind in the eaves and the waves breaking on the rocks of Hambry Point, two miles away.

"The hell you did," said the cowpoke who had jerked. He was about twenty, and suddenly afraid he might never see his mother again. "Don't you go tryin to put your trouble off on me, you damned feeb."

"I don't care *how* it happened," Depape said. He was aware he was playing for an audience, and knew that what an audience mostly wants is to be entertained. Sai R. B. Depape, always a trouper, intended to oblige.

He pinched the corduroy of his pants above the knees and pulled the legs up, revealing the toes of his boots. They were shiny and wet.

"See there. Look at what you got on my boots."

Sheemie looked up at him, grinning and terrified.

Stanley Ruiz decided he couldn't let this happen without at least try-ing to stop it. He had known Dolores Sheemer, the boy's mother; there was even a possibility that he himself was the boy's father. In any case, he liked Sheemie. The boy was foolish, but his heart was good, he never took a drink, and he always did his work. Also, he could find a smile for you even on the coldest, foggiest winter's day. That was a talent many people of normal intelligence did not have.

"Sai Depape," he said, taking a step forward and speaking in a low, respectful tone. "I'm very sorry about that. I'll be happy to buy your drinks for the rest of the evening if we can just forget this regrettable—"

Depape's movement was a blur almost too fast to see, but that wasn't what amazed the people who were in the Rest that night; they would have expected a man running with Jonas to be fast. What amazed them was the fact that *he never looked around to set his target*. He located Stanley by his voice alone.

Depape drew his gun and swept it to the right in a rising arc. It struck Stanley Ruiz dead in the mouth, mashing his lips and shattering three of his teeth. Blood splashed the backbar mirror; several high-flying drops decorated the tip of The Romp's lefthand nose. Stanley screamed, clapped his hands to his face, and staggered back against the shelf behind him. In the silence, the chattery clink of the bottles was very loud.

Down the bar, Reynolds cracked another clam and watched, fasci-nated. Good as a

play, it was.

Depape turned his attention back to the kneeling boy. "Clean my boots," he said. A look of muddled relief came onto Sheemie's face. Clean his boots! Yes! You bet! Right away! He pulled the rag he always kept in his back pocket. It wasn't even dirty yet. Not very, at least.

"No," Depape said patiently. Sheemie looked up at him, gaping and puzzled. "Put that nasty clout back where it come from—I don't even want to look at it."

Sheemie tucked it into his back pocket again.

"Lick em," Depape said in that same patient voice. "That's what I want. You lick my boots until they're dry again, and so clean you can see your stupid rabbit's face in em."

Sheemie hesitated, as if still not sure what was required of him. Or perhaps he was only processing the information.

"I'd do it, boy," Barkie Callahan said from what he hoped was a safe place behind Sheb's piano. "If you want to see the sun come up, I'd surely do it."

Depape had already decided the mush-brain wasn't going to see an-other sunrise, not in *this* world, but kept quiet. He had never had his boots licked. He wanted to see what it felt like. If it was nice—kind of sexy-like—he could maybe try Her Nibs out on it.

"Does I have to?" Sheemie's eyes were filling with tears. "Can't just I-sorry and polish em real good?"

"*Lick*, you feeble-minded donkey," Depape said.

Sheemie's hair fell across his forehead. His tongue poked tentatively out between his lips, and as he bent his head toward Depape's boots, the first of his tears fell.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it," a voice said. It was shocking in the silence— not because it was sudden, and certainly not because it was angry. It was shocking because it was amused. "I simply can't allow that. Nope. I would if I could, but I can't.

Unsanitary, you see. Who knows what dis-ease might be spread in such fashion? The mind quails! Ab-so-lutely *cuh-wails!*"

Standing just inside the batwing doors was the purveyor of this idiotic and potentially fatal screed: a young man of middling height, his flat-crowned hat pushed back to reveal a tumbled comma of brown hair. *Ex-cept young man* didn't really cover him, Depape realized; *young man* was drawing it heavy. He was only a kid. Around his neck, gods knew why, he wore a bird's skull like an enormous

comical pendant. It was hung on a chain that ran through the eyeholes. And in his hands was not a gun (*where would an unwhiskered dribble like him get a gun in the first place?* Depape wondered) but a goddam slingshot. Depape burst out laughing.

The kid laughed as well, nodding as if he understood how ridiculous the whole thing looked, how ridiculous the whole thing *was*. His laughter was infectious; Pettie, still up on her stool, tittered herself before clapping her hands over her mouth.

"This is no place for a boy such as you," Depape said. His revolver, an old five-shooter, was still out; it lay in his fist on the bar, with Stanley Ruiz's blood dripping off the gunsight. Depape, without raising it from the ironwood, wagged it slightly. "Boys who come to places like this learn had habits, kid. Dying is apt to be one of them. So I give you this one chance. Get out of here."

"Thank you, sir, I appreciate my one chance," the boy said. He spoke with great and winning sincerity . . . but didn't move. Still he stood just inside the batwing doors, with the wide elastic strap of his sling pulled back. Depape couldn't quite make out what was in the cup, but it glittered in the gaslight. A metal ball of some sort.

"Well, then?" Depape snarled. This was getting old, and fast.

"I know I'm being a pain in the neck, sir—not to mention an ache in (he ass and a milky drip from the tip of a sore dick—but if it's all the same to you, my dear friend, I'd like to give my chance to the young fellow on his knees before you. Let him apologize, let him polish your boots with his clout until you are entirely satisfied, and let him go on living his life."

There was an unfocused murmur of approval at this from the area where the card-players were watching. Depape didn't like the sound of it at all, and he made a sudden decision. The boy would die as well, executed for the crime of impertinence. The swabby who had spilled the bucket of dregs on him was clearly retarded. Yon brat had not even that excuse. He just thought he was funny. From the corner of his eye, Depape saw Reynolds moving to flank the boy, smooth as oiled silk. Depape appreciated the thought, but didn't believe he'd need much help with the slingshot specialist.

"Boy, I think you've made a mistake," he said in a kindly voice. "I really believe—" The cup of the slingshot dipped a little ... or Depape fancied it did. He

made his move.

### 3

They talked about it in Hambry for years to come; three decades after the fall of Gilead and the end of the Affiliation, they were still talking. By that time there were better than five hundred old gaffers (and a few old gam-mers) claiming that they were drinking a beer in the Rest that night, and saw it all.

Depape was young, and had the speed of a snake. Nevertheless, he never came close to getting a shot off at Cuthbert Allgood. There was a *thip-TWANG!* as the elastic was released, a steel gleam that drew itself across the saloon's smoky air like a line on a slateboard, and then Depape screamed. His revolver tumbled to the floor, and a foot spun it away from him across the sawdust (no one would claim that foot while the Big Cof-fin Hunters were still in Hambry; hundreds claimed it after they were gone). Still screaming—he could not bear pain—Depape raised his bleed-ing hand and looked at it with agonized, unbelieving eyes. Actually, he had been lucky. Cuthbert's ball had smashed the tip of the second finger and torn off the nail. Lower, and Depape would have been able to blow smoke-rings through his own palm.

Cuthbert, meanwhile, had already reloaded the cup of his slingshot and drawn the elastic back again. "Now," he said, "if I have your atten-tion, good sir—"

"I can't speak for his," Reynolds said from behind him, "but you got mine, partner. I don't know if you're good with that thing or just shitass lucky, but either way, you're done with it now. Relax the draw on it and put it down. That table in front of you's the place I want to see it."

"I've been blindsided," Cuthbert said sadly. "Betrayed once more by my own callow youth."

"I don't know nothing about your callow youth, brother, but you've been blindsided, all right," Reynolds agreed. He stood behind and slightly to the left of Cuthbert, and now he moved his gun forward until the boy could feel the muzzle against the back of his head. Reynolds thumbed the hammer. In the pool of silence which the Travellers' Rest had become, the sound was very loud. "Now put that twanger down."

"I think, good sir, that I must offer my regrets and decline."

"What?"

"You see, I've got my trusty sling aimed at your pleasant friend's head—" Cuthbert began, and when Depape shifted uneasily against the bar, Cuthbert's voice rose in a whipcrack that did not sound callow in the least. "*Stand still! Move again and you 're a dead man!*"

Depape subsided, holding his bloody hand against his pine-tacky shirt. For the first time he looked frightened, and for the first time that night—for the first time since hooking up with Jonas, in fact—Reynolds felt mastery of a situation on the verge of slipping away ... except how could it be? How could it be when he'd been able to circle around this smart-talking squint and get the drop on him? This should be *over*.

Lowering his voice to its former conversational—not to say play-ful—pitch, Cuthbert said: "If you shoot me, the ball flies and your friend dies, too."

"I don't believe that," Reynolds said, but he didn't like what he heard in his own voice. It sounded like doubt. "No man could make a shot like that."

"Why don't we let your friend decide?" Cuthbert raised his voice in a good-humored hail. "Hi-ho, there, Mr. Spectacles! Would you like your pal to shoot me?"

"No!" Depape's cry was shrill, verging on panic. "No, Clay! Don't shoot!"

"So it's a standoff," Reynolds said, bemused. And then bemusement changed to horror as he felt the blade of a very large knife slip against his throat. It pressed the tender skin just over his adam's apple.

"No, it's not," Alain said softly. "Put the gun down, my friend, or I'll cut your throat."

#### 4

Standing outside the batwing doors, having arrived by simple good for-tune in time for this Pinch and Jilly show, Jonas watched with amaze-ment, contempt, and something close to horror. First one of the Affiliation brats gets the drop on Depape, and when Reynolds covers that one, the big kid with the round face and the plowboy's shoulders puts a knife to Reynolds's throat. Neither of the brats a day over fifteen, and neither with a gun. Marvelous. He would have thought it



better than a travelling cir-cus, if not for the problems that would follow if this were not put right. What sort of work could they do in Hambry if it got around that the boogeymen were afraid of the children, instead of vice-versa?

*There's time to stop this before there's killing, mayhap. If you want to. Do you?*

Jonas decided he did; that they could walk out winners if they played it just right. He also decided the Affiliation brats would not, unless they were very lucky indeed, be leaving Mejis Barony alive.

*Where's the other one? Dearborn?*

A good question. An *important* question. Embarrassment would be-come outright humiliation if he found himself trumped in the same fash-ion as Roy and Clay.

Dearborn wasn't in the bar, and that was sure. Jonas turned on his heels, scanning the South High Street in both directions. It was almost day-bright under a Kissing Moon only two nights past the full. No one there, not in the street, not on the far side, where Hambry's mercantile store stood. The mercantile had a porch, but there was nothing on it save for a line of carved totems illustrating Guardians of the Beam: Bear, Tur-tle, Fish, Eagle, Lion, Bat, and Wolf. Seven of twelve, bright as marble in the moonlight, and no doubt great favorites of the kiddies. No men over there, though. Good. Lovely.

Jonas peered hard into the thread of alley between the mercantile and the butcher's, glimpsed a shadow behind a tumble of cast-off boxes, tensed, then relaxed as he saw a cat's shining green eyes. He nodded and turned to the business at hand, pushing back the lefthand batwing and stepping into the Travellers' Rest. Alain heard the squeak of a hinge, but Jonas's gun was at his temple before he could even begin to turn.

"Sonny, unless you're a barber, I think you'd better put that pigsticker down. You don't get a second warning."

"No," Alain said.

Jonas, who had expected nothing but compliance and had been pre-pared for nothing else, was thunderstruck. "*What?* "

"You heard me," Alain said. "I said no."

After making their manners and excusing themselves from Seafront, Roland had

left his friends to their own amusements—they would finish up at the Travellers' Rest, he supposed, but wouldn't stay long or get into much trouble when they had no money for cards and could drink nothing more exciting than cold tea. He had ridden into town another way, tethered his mount at a public post in the lower of the two town squares (Rusher had offered a single puzzled nicker at this treatment, but no more), and had since been tramping the empty, sleeping streets with his hat yanked low over his eyes and his hands clasped into an aching knot at the small of his back.

His mind was full of questions—things were wrong here, very wrong. At first he'd thought that was just his imagination, the childish part of him finding make-believe troubles and storybook intrigue because he had been removed from the heart of the real action. But after his talk with "Rennie" Renfrew, he knew better. There were questions, outright mysteries, and the most hellish thing of all was that he couldn't concentrate on them, let alone go any distance toward making sense of them. Every time he tried, Susan Delgado's face intruded ... her face, or the sweep of her hair, or even the pretty, fearless way her silk-slipped feet had followed his boots in the dance, never lagging or hesitating. Again and again he heard the last thing he had said to her, speaking in the stilted, priggish voice of a boy preacher. He would have given almost anything to take back both the tone and the words themselves. She'd be on Thorin's pillow come Reap-tide, and kindle him a child before the first snow flew, perhaps a male heir, and what of it? Rich men, famous men, and well-blooded men had taken gilly-girls since the beginning of time; Arthur Eld had had better than forty himself, according to the tales. So, really, what was it to him?

*I think I've gone and fallen in love with her. That's what it is to me.*

A dismaying idea, but not a dismissible one; he knew the landscape of his own heart too well. He loved her, very likely it was so, but part of him also hated her, and held to the shocking thought he'd had at dinner: that he could have shot Susan Delgado through the heart if he'd come armed. Some of this was jealousy, but not all; perhaps not even the greater part. He had made some indefinable but powerful connection between Olive Thorin—her sad but game little smile from the foot of the table—and his own mother. Hadn't some of that same woeful, rueful look been in his mother's eyes on the day when he had come upon her and his father's advisor? Marten in an open-throated shirt, Gabrielle Deschain in a sacque that had

slipped off one shoulder, the whole room reeking of what they had been up to that hot morning?

His mind, tough as it already was, shrank from the image, horrified. It returned instead to that of Susan Delgado—her gray eyes and shining hair. He saw her laughing, chin uptilted, hands clasped before the sapphire Thorin had given her. Roland could forgive her the gilly business, he supposed. What he could not forgive, in spite of his attraction to Susan, was that awful smile on Olive Thorin's face as she watched the girl sitting in what should have been her place. Sitting in her place and laughing.

These were the things that chased through his head as he paced off acres of moonlight. He had no business with such thoughts, Susan Delgado was not the reason he was here, nor was the ridiculous knuckle-cracking Mayor and his pitiable country-Mary of a wife . . . yet he couldn't put them away and get to what *was* his business. He had forgotten the face of his father, and walked in the moonlight, hoping to find it again.

In such fashion he came along the sleeping, silver-gilded High Street, walking north to south, thinking vaguely that he would perhaps stand Cuthbert and Alain to a taste of something wet and toss the dice down Satan's Alley a time or two before going back to get Rusher and call it a night. And so it was that he happened to spy Jonas—the man's gaunt figure and fall of long white hair were impossible to mistake—standing outside the batwings of the Travellers' Rest and peering in. Jonas did this with one hand on the butt of his gun and a tense set of body that put everything else from Roland's mind at once. Something was going on, and if Bert and Alain were in there, it might involve them. They were the strangers in town, after all, and it was possible—even likely—that not everyone in Hambry loved the Affiliation with the fervor that had been professed at tonight's dinner. Or perhaps it was Jonas's friends who were in trouble. *Something* was brewing, in any case. With no clear thought as to why he was doing it, Roland went softly up the steps to the mercantile's porch. There was a line of carved animals there (and probably spiked firmly to the boards, so that drunken wags from the saloon across the street couldn't carry them away, chanting the nursery rhymes of their childhood as they went). Roland stepped behind the last one in line—it was the Bear—and bent his knees so that the crown of his hat wouldn't show. Then he went as still as the carving. He could see Jonas turn, look across the street, then look to his left,

peering at something—

Very low, a sound: *Waow! Waow!*

*It's a cat. In the alley.*

Jonas looked a moment longer, then stepped into the Rest. Roland was out from behind the carved bear, down the steps, and into the street at once. He hadn't Alain's gift of the touch, but he had intuitions that were sometimes very strong. This one was telling him he must hurry.

Overhead, the Kissing Moon drifted behind a cloud.

## 6

Pettie the Trotter still stood on her stool, but she no longer felt drunk and singing was the last thing on her mind. She could hardly believe what she was seeing: Jonas had the drop on a boy who had the drop on Reynolds who had the drop on *another* boy (this last one wearing a bird's skull around his neck on a chain) who had the drop on Roy Depape. Who had, in fact, drawn some *of* Roy Depape's blood. And when Jonas had told the big boy to put down the knife he was holding to Reynolds's throat, *the big boy had refused.*

*You can blow my lights out and send me to the clearing at the end of the path,* thought Pettie, *for now I've seen it all, so I have.* She supposed she should get off the stool—there was apt to be shooting any second now, and likely a great lot of it—but sometimes you just had to take your chances.

Because some things were just too good to miss.

## 7

"We're in this town on Affiliation business," Alain said. He had one hand buried deep in Reynolds's sweaty hair; the other maintained a steady pressure on the knife at Reynolds's throat. Not quite enough to break the skin. "If you harm us, the Affiliation will take note. So will our fathers. You'll be hunted like dogs and hung upside down, like as not, when you're caught."

"Sonny, there's not an Affiliation patrol within two hundred wheels of here, probably three hundred," Jonas said, "and I wouldn't care a fart in a windstorm if there was one just over yon hill. Nor do your fathers mean a squitter to me. Put

that knife down or I'll blow your fucking brains out."

"No."

"Future developments in this matter should be quite wonderful," Cuthbert said cheerily . . . although there was now a beat of nerves under his prattle. Not fear, perhaps not even nervous-ness, just nerves. The good kind, more likely than not, Jonas thought sourly. He had underestimated these boys at meat; if nothing else was clear, that was. "You shoot Richard, and Richard cuts Mr. Cloak's throat just as Mr. Cloak shoots me; my poor dying fingers release my sling's elastic and put a steel ball in what passes for Mr. Spectacles's brain. *You'll* walk away, at least, and I suppose that will be a great comfort to your dead friends."

"Call it a draw," Alain said to the man with the gun at his temple.

"We all stand back and walk away."

"No, sonny," Jonas said. His voice was patient, and he didn't think his anger showed, but it was rising. Gods, to be outfaced like this, even temporarily! "No one does like that to the Big Coffin Hunters. This is your last chance to—" Something hard and cold and very much to the point pressed against the back of Jonas's shirt, dead center between the shoulderblades. He knew what it was and who held it at once, understood the game was lost, but couldn't understand how such a ludicrous, maddening turn of events could have happened.

"Holster the gun," the voice behind the sharp tip of metal said. It was empty, somehow—not just calm, but emotionless. "Do it now, or this goes in your heart. No more talk. Talking's done. Do it or die."

Jonas heard two things in that voice: youth and truth. He bolstered his gun.

"You with the black hair. Take your gun out of my friend's ear and put it back in your holster. Now."

Clay Reynolds didn't have to be invited twice, and he uttered a long, shaky sigh when Alain took the blade off his throat and stood back. Cuthbert did not look around, only stood with the elastic of his slingshot pulled and his elbow cocked.

"You at the bar," Roland said. "Holster up."

Depape did so, grimacing with pain as he bumped his hurt finger against his gunbelt. Only when this gun was put away did Cuthbert re-lax his hold on his sling and drop the ball from the cup into the palm of his hand.

The cause of all this had been forgotten as the effects played them-selves out. Now Sheemie got to his feet and pelted across the room. His cheeks were wet with

tears. He grasped one of Cuthbert's hands, kissed it several times (loud smacking noises that would have been comic under other circumstances), and held the hand to his cheek for a moment. Then he dodged past Reynolds, pushed open the righthand batwing, and flew right into the arms of a sleepy-eyed and still half-drunk Sheriff. Avery had been fetched by Sheb from the jailhouse, where the Sheriff o' Barony had been sleeping off the Mayor's ceremonial dinner in one of his own cells.

## 8

"This is a nice mess, isn't it?"

Avery speaking. No one answering. He hadn't expected they would, not if they knew what was good for them.

The office area of the jail was too small to hold three men, three strap-ping not-quite-men, and one extra-large Sheriff comfortably, so Avery had herded them into the nearby Town Gathering Hall, which echoed to the soft flutter of the pigeons in the rafters and the steady beat-beat-beat of the grandfather clock behind the podium.

It was a plain room, but an inspired choice all the same. It was where the townsfolk and Barony landowners had come for hundreds of years to make their decisions, pass their laws, and occasionally send some especially troublesome person west. There was a feeling of seriousness in its moon-glimmered darkness, and Roland thought even the old man, Jonas, felt a little of it. Certainly it invested Sheriff Herk Avery with an authority he might not otherwise have been able to project.

The room was filled with what were in that place and time called "bareback benches"—oaken pews with no cushions for either butt *or* back. There were sixty in all, thirty on each side of a wide center aisle. Jonas, Depape, and Reynolds sat on the front bench to the left of the aisle. Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain sat across from them on the right. Reynolds and Depape looked sullen and embarrassed; Jonas looked remote and composed. Will Dearborn's little crew was quiet. Roland had given Cuthbert a look which he hoped the boy could read: *One smart remark and I'll rip the tongue right out of your head.* He thought the message had been received. Bert had stowed his idiotic "lookout" somewhere, which was a good

sign.

"A nice mess," Avery repeated, and blew liquor-scented wind at them in a deep sigh. He was sitting on the edge of the stage with his short legs hanging down, looking at them with a kind of disgusted wonder.

The side door opened and in came Deputy Dave, his white service jacket laid aside, his monocle tucked into the pocket of his more usual khaki shirt. In one hand he carried a mug; in the other a folded scrap of what looked to Roland like birch-bark.

"Did ye boil the first half, David?" Avery asked. He now wore a put-upon expression.

"Aye."

"Boiled it twice?"

"Aye, twice."

"For that was the directions."

"Aye," Dave repeated in a resigned voice. He handed Avery the cup and dumped the remaining contents of the birch-bark scrap in when the Sheriff held the cup out for them.

Avery swirled the liquid, peered in with a doubtful, resigned expression, then drank. He grimaced. "Oh, foul!" he cried. "What's so nasty as this?"

"What is it?" Jonas asked.

"Headache powder. *Hangover* powder, ye might say. From the old witch. The one who lives up the Coos. Know where I mean?" Avery gave Jonas a knowing look. The old gunny pretended not to see it, but Roland thought he had. And what did it mean? Another mystery.

Depape looked up at the word *Coos*, then went back to sucking his wounded finger. Beyond Depape, Reynolds sat with his cloak drawn about him, looking grimly down at his lap.

"Does it work?" Roland asked.

"Aye, boy, but ye pay a price for witch's medicine. Remember that: ye always pay. This 'un takes away the headache if ye drink too much of Mayor Thorin's damned punch, but it gripes the bowels somethin fierce, so it does. And the farts—!" He waved a hand in front of his face to demonstrate, took another sip from the cup, then set it aside. He returned to his former gravity, but the mood in the room had lightened just a little; they all felt it. "Now what are we to do about this business?"

Herk Avery swept them slowly with his eyes, from Reynolds on his far right to Alain—"Richard Stockworth"—on his far left. "Eh, boys? We've got the Mayor's men on one side and the Affiliation's . . . men ... on the other, six fellows at the point of murder, and over what? A halfwit and a spilled bucket of slops." He pointed first at the Big Coffin Hunters, then to the Affiliation's counters. "Two powderkegs and one fat sheriff in the middle. So what's yer thoughts on't? Speak up, don't be shy, you wasn't shy in Coral's whoreden down the road, don't be shy in here!"

No one said anything. Avery sipped some more of his foul drink, then set it down and looked at them decisively. What he said next didn't surprise Roland much; it was exactly what he would have expected of a man like Avery, right down to the tone which implied that he considered himself a man who could make the hard decisions when he had to, by the gods.

"I'll tell yer what we're going to do: We're going to forget it."

He now assumed the air of one who expects an uproar and is prepared to handle it. When no one spoke or even shuffled a foot, he looked dis-comfited. Yet he had a job to do, and the night was growing old. He squared his shoulders and pushed on. "I'll not spend the next three or four months waiting to see who among you's killed who. Nay! Nor will I be put in a position where I might have to take the punishment for your stupid quarrel over that halfwit Sheemie.

"I appeal to your practical natures, boys, when I point out that I may **be** either your friend or your enemy during your time here . . . but I'd be wrong if I didn't also appeal to your more noble natures, which I am sure are both large and sensitive." The Sheriff now tried on an exalted expression, which was not, in Roland's estimation, notably successful. Avery turned his attention to Jonas.

"Sai, I can't believe ye'll want to be causin trouble for three young men from the Affiliation—the Affiliation that's been like mother's milk and father's shelterin hand since aye or oh fifty generations back; ye'd not be so disrespectful as all that, would ye?"

Jonas shook his head, smiling his thin smile.

Avery nodded again. Things were going along well, that nod said. "Ye've all yer own cakes to bake and oats to roll, and none of ye wants something like this to get in the way of doin yer jobs, do yer?"

They all shook their heads this time.



"So what I want you to do is to stand up, face each other, shake hands, and cry each other's pardon. If ye don't do that, ye can all ride west out of town by sunrise, far as I'm concerned."

He picked up the mug and took a bigger drink this time. Roland saw that the man's hand was trembling the tiniest bit, and wasn't surprised. It was all bluff and blow, of course. The Sheriff would have understood that Jonas, Reynolds, and Depape were beyond his authority as soon as he saw the small blue coffins on their hands; after tonight, he must feel the same way about Dearborn, Stockworth, and Heath. He could only hope that all would see where their self-interest lay. Roland did. So, apparently, did Jonas, for even as Roland got up, Jonas did the same.

Avery recoiled a little bit, as if expecting Jonas to go for his gun and Dearborn for the knife in his belt, the one he'd been holding against Jonas's back when Avery came puffing up to the saloon.

There was no gun or knife drawn, however. Jonas turned toward Roland and held out his hand.

"He's right, lad," Jonas said in his reedy, quavering voice.

"Yes."

"Will you shake with an old man, and vow to start over?"

"Yes." Roland held out his hand.

Jonas took it. "I cry your pardon."

"I cry your own, Mr. Jonas." Roland tapped left-hand at his throat, as was proper when addressing an elder in such fashion.

As the two of them sat down, Alain and Reynolds rose, as neatly as men in a prerehearsed ceremony. Last of all, Cuthbert and Depape rose. Roland was all but positive that Cuthbert's foolishness would pop out like Jack from his box—the idiot would simply not be able to help himself, al-though he must surely realize that Depape was no man to make sport of tonight.

"Cry your pardon," Bert said, with an admirable lack of laughter in his voice.

"Cryerown," Depape mumbled, and held out his bloodstreaked hand. Roland had a nightmare vision of Bert squeezing down on it as hard as he could, making the redhead yowl like an owl on a hot stove, but Bert's grip was as restrained as his voice.

Avery sat on the edge of the stage with his pudgy legs hanging down, watching it all with avuncular good cheer. Even Deputy Dave was smiling.

"Now I propose to shake hands with yer all myself, 'n then send yer on yer ways, for the hour's late, so it is, and such as me needs my beauty rest." He chuckled, and again looked uncomfortable when no one joined in. But he slipped off the stage and began to shake hands, doing so with the enthusiasm of a minister who has finally succeeded in marrying a headstrong couple after a long and stormy courtship.

## 9

When they stepped outside, the moon was down and the first lightening in the sky had begun to show at the far edge of the Clean Sea. "Mayhap we'll meet again, sai," Jonas said. "Mayhap we will," Roland said, and swung up into his saddle.

## 10

The Big Coffin Hunters were staying in the watchman's house about a mile south of Seafront—five miles out of town, this was.

Halfway there, Jonas stopped at a turnout beside the road. From here the land made a steep, rocky descent to the brightening sea.

"Get down, mister," he said. It was Depape he was looking at.

"Jonas...Jonas, I..."

"Get down."

Biting his lip nervously, Depape got down.

"Take off your spectacles."

"Jonas, what's this about? I don't—"

"Or if you want em broke, leave em on. It's all the same to me."

Biting his lip harder now, Depape took off his gold-rimmed spec-tacles. They were barely in his hand before Jonas had fetched him a ter-rific clip on the side of the head. Depape cried out and reeled toward the drop. Jonas drove forward, moving as fast as he had struck, and seized him by the shirt just before he went tumbling over the edge. Jonas twisted his hand into the shirt material and yanked Depape toward him. He breathed deep, inhaling the scent of pine-tar and Depape's sweat.

"I ought to toss you right over the edge," he breathed. "Do you know how much

harm you've done?"

"I... Jonas, I never meant... just a little fun is all I... how was we supposed to know they ..."

Slowly, Jonas's hand relaxed. That last bit of babble had gone home. How was they supposed to know, that was ungrammatical but right. And if not for tonight, they might *not* have known. If you looked at it that way, Depape had actually done them a favor. The devil you knew was always preferable to the devil you didn't. Still, word would get around, and people would laugh. Maybe even that was all right, though. The laughter would stop in due time.

"Jonas, I cry your pardon."

"Shut up," Jonas said. In the east, the sun would shortly heave itself over the horizon, casting its first gleams on a new day in this world of toil and sorrow. "I ain't going to toss you over, because then I'd have to toss Clay over and follow along myself. They got the drop on us the same as you, right?"

Depape wanted to agree, but thought it might be dangerous to do so. He was prudently silent.

"Get down here, Clay."

Clay slid off his mount.

"Now hunker."

The three of them hunkered on their bootsoles, heels up. Jonas plucked a shoot of grass and put it between his lips. "Affiliation brats is what we were told, and we had no reason not to believe it," he said. "The bad boys are sent all the way to Mejis, a sleepy Barony on the Clean Sea, on a make-work detail that's two pans penance and three parts punish-ment. Ain't that what we were told?"

They nodded.

"Either of you believe it after tonight?"

Depape shook his head. So did Clay.

"They may be rich boys, but that's not all they are," Depape said. "The way they were tonight . . . they were like . . ." He trailed off, not quite willing to finish the thought. It was too absurd.

Jonas was willing. "They acted like gunslingers."

Neither Jonas nor Reynolds replied at first. Then Clay Reynolds said, "They're too young, Eldred. Too young *by years*."

"Not too young to be 'prentices, mayhap. In any case, we're going to find out." He

turned to Depape. "You've got some riding to do, cully."

"Aww, Jonas—!"

"None of us exactly covered ourselves with glory, but you were the fool that started the pot boiling." He looked at Depape, but Depape only looked down at the ground between them. "You're going to ride their backtrail, Roy, and you're going to ask questions until you've got the answers you think will satisfy my curiosity. Clay and I are mostly going to wait. And watch. Play Castles with em, if you like. When I feel like enough time's gone by for us to be able to do a little snooping without be-ing trigged, mayhap we'll do it."

He bit on the piece of grass in his mouth. The larger piece tumbled out and lay between his boots.

"Do you know why I shook his hand? That boy Dearborn's damned hand? Because we can't rock the boat, boys. Not just when it's edging in toward harbor. Latigo and the folks we've been waiting for will be mov-ing toward us very soon, now. Until they get into these parts, it's in our interest to keep the peace. But I tell you this: no one puts a knife to Eldred Jonas's back and lives. Now listen, Roy. Don't make me tell you any of this twice."

Jonas began to speak, leaning forward over his knees toward Depape as he did. After awhile, Depape began to nod. He might like a little trip, actually. After the recent comedy in the Travellers' Rest, a change of air might be just the ticket.

## 11

The boys were almost back to the Bar K and the sun was coming over the horizon before Cuthbert broke the silence. "Well! That was an amusing and instructive evening, was it not?" Neither Roland nor Alain replied, so Cuthbert leaned over to the rook's skull, which he had returned to its former place on the horn of his saddle. "What say *you*, old friend? Did we enjoy our evening? Dinner, a circle-dance, and almost killed to top things off. Did you enjoy?"

The lookout only stared ahead of Cuthbert's horse with its great dark eyes.

"He says he's too tired for talk," Cuthbert said, then yawned. "So'm I, actually." He looked at Roland. "I got a good look into Mr. Jonas's eyes after he shook hands with you, Will. He means to kill you."

Roland nodded.

"They mean to kill all of us," Alain said.

Roland nodded again. "We'll make it hard for them, but they know more about us now than they did at dinner. We'll not get behind them that way again."

He stopped, just as Jonas had stopped not three miles from where they now were. Only instead of looking directly out over the Clean Sea, Roland and his friends were looking down the long slope of the Drop. A herd of horses was moving from west to east, barely more than shadows in this light.

"What do you see, Roland?" Alain asked, almost timidly.

"Trouble," Roland said, "and in our road." Then he gighed his horse and rode on. Before they got back to the Bar K bunkhouse, he was think-ing about Susan again. Five minutes after he dropped his head on his flat burlap pillow, he was dreaming of her.

## CHAPTER VII ON THE DROP

### 1

Three weeks had passed since the welcoming dinner at Mayor's House and the incident at the Travellers' Rest. There had been no more trouble between Roland's *ka-tet* and Jonas's. In the night sky, Kissing Moon had waned and Peddler's Moon had made its first thin appearance. The days were bright and warm; even the oldtimers admitted it was one of the most beautiful summers in memory.

On a mid-morning as beautiful as any that summer, Susan Delgado galloped a two-year-old *rosillo* named Pylon north along the Drop. The wind dried the tears on

her cheeks and yanked her unbound hair out behind her as she went. She urged Pylon to go faster yet, lightly thumping his sides with her spurless boots. Pylon turned it up a notch at once, ears flattening, tail flagging. Susan, dressed in jeans and the faded, oversized khaki shirt (one of her da's) that had caused all the trouble, leaned over the light practice saddle, holding to the horn with one hand and rubbing the other down the side of the horse's strong, silky neck.

"More!" she whispered. "More and faster! Go on, boy!"

Pylon let it out yet another notch. That he had at least one more in him she knew; that he had even one more beyond that she suspected.

They sped along the Drop's highest ridge, and she barely saw the magnificent slope of land below her, all green and gold, or the way it faded into the blue haze of the Clean Sea. On any other day the view and the cool, salt-smelling breeze would have uplifted her. Today she only wanted to hear the steady low thunder of Pylon's hoofs and feel the flex of his muscles beneath her; today she wanted to outrun her own thoughts.

And all because she had come downstairs this morning dressed for riding in one of her father's old shirts.

## 2

Aunt Cord had been at the stove, wrapped in her dressing gown and with her hair still netted. She dished herself up a bowl of oatmeal and brought it to the table. Susan had known things weren't good as soon as her aunt I timed toward her, bowl in hand; she could see the discontented twitch of Aunt Cord's lips, and the disapproving glance she shot at the orange Susan was peeling. Her aunt was still rankled by the silver and gold she had expected to have in hand by now, coins which would be withheld yet awhile due to the witch's prankish decree that Susan should remain a virgin until autumn.

But that wasn't the main thing, and Susan knew it. Quite simply put, the two of them had had enough of each other. The money was only one of Aunt Cord's disappointed expectations; she had counted on having the house at the edge of the Drop to herself this summer . . . except, perhaps, (or the occasional visit from Mr. Eldred Jonas, with whom Cordelia seemed quite taken. Instead, here they still were, one woman growing toward the end of her courses, thin, disapproving lips

in a thin, disapproving face, tiny apple-breasts under her high-necked dresses with their choker collars (The Neck, she frequently told Susan, is the First Thing to Go), her hair losing its former chestnut shine and showing wire-threads of gray; the other young, intelligent, agile, and rounding toward the peak of her physical beauty. They grated against each other, each word seeming to produce a spark, and that was not surprising. The man who had loved them both enough to make them love each other was gone.

"Are ye going out on that horse?" Aunt Cord had said, putting her bowl down and sitting in a shaft of early sun. It was a bad location, one she never would have allowed herself to be caught in had Mr. Jonas been in attendance. The strong light made her face look like a carved mask. There was a cold-sore growing at one corner other mouth; she always got them when she was not sleeping well.

"Aye," Susan said.

"Ye should eat more'n that, then. 'Twon't keep ye til nine o' the clock, girl."

"It'll keep me fine," Susan had replied, eating the sections of orange faster. She could see where this was tending, could see the look of dislike and disapproval in her aunt's eyes, and wanted to get away from the table before trouble could begin.

"Why not let me get ye a dish of this?" Aunt Cord asked, and plopped her spoon into her oatmeal. To Susan it sounded like a horse's hoof stamping down in mud—or shit—and her stomach clenched. "It'll hold ye to lunch, if ye plan to ride so long. I suppose a fine young lady such as yerself can't be bothered with chores—"

"They're done." *And you know they 're done*, she did not add. *I did em while you were sitting before your glass, poking at that sore on your mouth.*

Aunt Cord dropped a chunk of creamery butter into her muck—Susan had no idea how the woman stayed so thin, really she didn't—and watched it begin to melt. For a moment it seemed that breakfast might end on a reasonably civilized note, after all.

Then the shirt business had begun.

"Before ye go out, Susan, I want ye to take off that rag you're wear-ing and put on one of the new riding blouses Thorin sent ye week before last. It's the least ye can do to show yer—"

Anything her aunt might have said past that point would have been lost in anger even if Susan hadn't interrupted. She passed a hand down the sleeve of her shirt,

loving its texture—it was almost velvety from so many washings. "This *rag* belonged to my father!"

"Aye, Pat's." Aunt Cord sniffed. "It's too big for ye, and worn out, and not proper, in any case. When you were young it was mayhap all right to wear a man's button-shirt, but now that ye have a woman's bustline ..."

The riding blouses were on hangers in the comer; they had come four days ago and Susan hadn't even deigned to take them up to her room. There were three of them, one red, one green, one blue, all silk, all un-doubtedly worth a small fortune. She loathed their pretension, and the overblown, blushy-frilly look of them: full sleeves to flutter artistically in the wind, great floppy foolish collars . . . and, of course, the low-scooped fronts which were probably all Thorin would see if she appeared before him dressed in one. As she wouldn't, if she could possibly help it. "My 'woman's bust-line,' as you call it, is of no interest to me and can't possibly be of any interest to anyone else when I'm out riding," Susan said.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. If one of the Barony's drovers should see you—even Rennie, he's out that way all the time, as ye well know—it wouldn't hurt for him to mention to Hart that he saw yer wearing one of the *camisas* that he so kindly gave to ye. Now would it? Why do ye have lo he such a stiffkins, girl? Why always so unwilling, so unfair?"

"What does it matter to ye, one way or t'other?" Susan had asked. "Ye have the money, don't ye? And ye'll have more yet. After he fucks me."

Aunt Cord, her face white and shocked and furious, had leaned across the table and slapped her. "How dare thee use that word in my house, ye *malhablada*? How dare ye?"

That was when her tears began to flow—at hearing her call it her house. "It was *my father's* house! His and mine! Ye were all on yer own with no real place to go, except perhaps to the Quarters, and he took ye in! *He took ye in, Aunt!*"

The last two orange sections were still in her hand. She threw them into her aunt's face, then pushed herself back from the table so violently that her chair tottered, tipped, and spilled her to the floor. Her aunt's shadow fell over her. Susan crawled frantically out of it, her hair hanging, her slapped cheek throbbing, her eyes burning with tears, her throat swelled and hot. At last she found her feet.

"Ye ungrateful girl," her aunt said. Her voice was soft and so full of venom it was almost caressing. "After all I have done for thee, and all Hart Thorin has done for



thee. Why, the very nag ye mean to ride this morning was Hart's gift of respect to—"

"*PYLON WAS OURS!*" she shrieked, almost maddened with fury at this deliberate blurring of the truth. "*ALL OF THEM WERE! THE HORSES, THE LAND—THEY WERE OURS!*"

"Lower thy voice," Aunt Cord said.

Susan took a deep breath and tried to find some control. She swept her hair back from her face, revealing the red print of Aunt Cord's hand on her cheek. Cordelia flinched a little at the sight of it.

"My father never would have allowed this," Susan said. "He never would have allowed me to go as Hart Thorin's gilly. Whatever he might have felt about Hart as the Mayor ... or as his *patrono* ... he never would have allowed this. And ye know it. *Thee* knows it."

Aunt Cord rolled her eyes, then twirled a finger around her ear as if Susan had gone mad. "Thee agreed to it yerself, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty. Aye, so ye did. And if yer girlish megrims now cause ye to want to cry off what's been done—"

"Aye," Susan agreed. "I agreed to the bargain, so I did. After ye'd dunned me about it day and night, after ye'd come to me in tears—"

"I never did!" Cordelia cried, stung.

"Have ye forgotten so quick. Aunt? Aye, I suppose. As by tonight ye'll have forgotten slapping me at breakfast. Well, I haven't forgotten. Thee cried, all right, cried and told me ye feared we might be turned off the land, since we had no more legal right to it, that we'd be on the road, thee wept and said—"

"*Stop calling me that!*" Aunt Cord shouted. Nothing on earth mad-dened her so much as having her own thees and thous turned back at her. "Thee has no more right to the old tongue than thee has to thy stupid sheep's complaints! Go on! Get out!"

But Susan went on. Her rage was at the flood and would not be turned aside.

"Thee wept and said we'd be turned out, turned west, that we'd never see my da's homestead or Hambry again . . . and then, when I was fright-ened enough, ye talked of the cunning little baby I'd have. The land that was ours to begin with given back again. The horses that were ours like-wise given back. As a sign of the Mayor's honesty, I have a horse *I myself helped to foal*. And what have I done to

deserve these things that would have been mine in any case, but for the loss of a single paper? What have I done so that he should give ye money? What have I done save promise to fuck him while his wife of forty year sleeps down the hall?" "Is it the money ye want, then?" Aunt Cord asked, smiling furiously. "Do ye and do ye and aye? Ye shall have it, then. Take it, keep it, lose it, feed it to the swine, I care not!"

She turned to her purse, which hung on a post by the stove. She began to fumble in it, but her motions quickly lost speed and conviction. There was an oval of mirror mounted to the left of the kitchen doorway, and in it Susan caught sight other aunt's face. What she saw there—a mixture of hatred, dismay, and greed—made her heart sink.

"Never mind, Aunt. I see thee's loath to give it up, and I wouldn't have it, anyway. It's whore's money."

Aunt Cord turned back to her, face shocked, her purse conveniently forgotten. "'Tis not whoring, ye stupid get! Why, some of the greatest women in history have been gillys, and some of the greatest men have been born *of* gillys. *'Tis not whoring!*"

Susan ripped the red silk blouse from where it hung and held it up. The shirt moulded itself to her breasts as if it had been longing all the while to touch them. "Then why does he send me these whore's clothes?"

"Susan!" Tears stood in Aunt Cord's eyes.

Susan flung the shirt at her as she had the orange slices. It landed on her shoes. "Pick it up and put it on yerself, if ye fancy. *You* spread yer legs for him, if ye fancy."

She turned and hurled herself out the door. Her aunt's half-hysterical shriek had followed her: "Don't thee go off thinking foolish thoughts, Su-san! Foolish thoughts lead to foolish deeds, and it's too late for either! Thee's agreed!"

She knew that. And however fast she rode Pylon along the Drop, she could not outrace her knowing. She had agreed, and no matter how horri-fied Pat Delgado might have been at the fix she had gotten herself into, he would have seen one thing clear—she had made a promise, and promises must be kept. Hell awaited those who would not do so.

She eased the *rosillo* back while he still had plenty of wind. She looked behind her, saw that she had come nearly a mile, and brought him down further—to a canter, a trot, a fast walk. She took a deep breath and let it out. For the first time that morning she registered the day's bright beauty—gulls circling in the hazy air off to the west, high grasses all around her, and flowers in every shaded cranny: cornflowers and lupin and phlox and her favorites, the delicate blue silkflowers. From every-where came the somnolent buzz of bees. The sound soothed her, and with the high surge of her emotions subsiding a little, she was able to admit something to herself... admit it, and then voice it aloud.

"Will Dearborn," she said, and shivered at the sound of his name on her lips, even though there was no one to hear it but Pylon and the bees. So she said it again, and when the words were out she abruptly turned her own wrist inward to her mouth and kissed it where the blood beat close to the surface. The action shocked her because she hadn't known she was going to do it, and shocked her more because the taste of her own skin and sweat aroused her immediately. She felt an urge to cool herself off as she had in her bed after meeting him. The way she felt, it would be short work.

Instead, she growled her father's favorite cuss—"Oh, bite it!"—and spat past her boot. Will Dearborn had been responsible for all too much upset in her life these last three weeks; Will Dearborn with his unsettling blue eyes, his dark tumble of hair, and his stiff-necked, judgmental attitude. *I can be discreet, madam. As for propriety? I'm amazed you even know the word.*

Every time she thought of that, her blood sang with anger and shame. Mostly anger. How dare he presume to make judgments? He who had grown up possessing every luxury, no doubt with servants to tend his every whim and so much gold that he likely didn't even need it—he would be given the things he wanted free, as a way of currying favor. What would a boy like that—for that was all he was, really, just a boy—know about the hard choices she had made? For that matter, how could such as Mr. Will Dearborn of Hemphill understand that she hadn't really made those choices at all? That she had been carried to them the way a mother cat carries a wayward kitten back to the nesting-box, by the scruff of the neck?

Still, he wouldn't leave her mind; she knew, even if Aunt Cord didn't, that there

had been an unseen third present at their quarrel this morning. She knew something else as well, something that would have upset her aunt to no end. Will Dearborn hadn't forgotten her, either.



4

About a week after the welcoming dinner and Dearborn's disastrous, hurtful remark to her, the retarded slops-fella from the Travellers' Rest— Sheemie, folks called him—had appeared at the house Susan and her aunt shared. In his hands he

held a large bouquet, mostly made up of the wild-flowers that grew out on the Drop, but with a scattering of dusky wild roses, as well. They looked like pink punctuation marks. On the boy's face there had been a wide, sunny grin as he swung the gate open, not waiting for an invitation.

Susan had been sweeping the front walk at the time; Aunt Cord had been out back, in the garden. That was fortunate, but not very surprising; these days the two of them got on best when they kept apart as much as they could.

Susan had watched Sheemie come up the walk, his grin beaming out from behind his upheld freight of flowers, with a mixture of fascination and horror.

"G'day, Susan Delgado, daughter of Pat," Sheemie said cheerfully. "I come to you on an errand and cry yer pardon at any troubleation I be, oh aye, for I am a problem for folks, and know it same as them. These be for you. Here."

He thrust them out, and she saw a small, folded envelope tucked amongst them.

"Susan?" Aunt Cord's voice, from around the side of the house . . . and getting closer. "Susan, did I hear the gate?"

"Yes, Aunt!" she called back. Curse the woman's sharp ears! Susan nimbly plucked the envelope from its place among the phlox and daisies. Into her dress pocket it went.

"They from my third-best friend," Sheemie said. "I got three different friends now. This many." He held up two fingers, frowned, added two more, and then grinned splendidly. "Arthur Heath my first-best friend, Dick Stockworth my second-best friend. My third-best friend—"

"Hush!" Susan said in a low, fierce voice that made Sheemie's smile fade. "Not a word about your three friends."

A funny little flush, almost like a pocket fever, raced across her skin—it seemed to run down her neck from her cheeks, then slip all the way to her feet. There had been a lot of talk in Hambry about Sheemie's new friends during the past week—talk about little else, it seemed. The stories she had heard were outlandish, but if they weren't true, why did the versions told by so many different witnesses sound so much alike?

Susan was still trying to get herself back under control when Aunt Cord swept around the comer. Sheemie fell back a step at the sight of her, puzzlement becoming outright dismay. Her aunt was allergic to beestings, and was presently

swaddled from the top of her straw *'brera* to the hem of her faded garden dress in gauzy stuff that made her look peculiar in strong light and downright eerie in shade. Adding a final touch to her costume, she carried a pair of dirt-streaked garden shears in one gloved hand.

She saw the bouquet and bore down on it, shears raised. When she reached her niece, she slid the scissors into a loop on her belt (almost re-luctantly, it seemed to the niece herself) and parted the veil on her face. "Who sent ye those?"

"I don't know. Aunt," Susan said, much more calmly than she felt. "This is the young man from the inn—"

"Inn!" Aunt Cord snorted.

"He doesn't seem to know who sent him," Susan carried on. If only she could get him out of here! "He's, well, I suppose you'd say he's—"

"He's a fool, yes, I know that." Aunt Cord cast Susan a brief, irritated look, then bent her attention on Sheemie. Talking with her gloved hands upon her knees, shouting directly into his face, she asked: "*WHO . . . SENT . . . THESE . . . FLOWERS . . . YOUNG... MAN? "*

The wings of her face-veil, which had been pushed aside, now fell back into place. Sheemie took another step backward. He looked frightened.

"*WAS IT . . . PERHAPS . . . SOMEONE FROM... SEAFRONT? . . . FROM . . . MAYOR . . . THORIN? . . . TELL ...ME... AND . . . I'LL . . . GIVE... YOU . . . A PENNY. "*

Susan's heart sank, sure he would tell—he'd not have the wit to understand he'd be getting her into trouble. Will, too, likely.

But Sheemie only shook his head. "Don't 'member. I got a empty head, sai, so I do. Stanley says I a bugwit."

His grin shone out again, a splendid thing full of white, even teeth. Aunt Cord answered it with a grimace. "Oh, foo! Be gone, then. Straight back to town, too—don't be hanging around hoping for a goose-feather. For a boy who can't remember deserves not so much as a penny! And don't you come back here again, no matter who wants you to carry flow-ers for the young sai. Do you hear me?" Sheemie had nodded energetically. Then: "Sai?"

Aunt Cord glowered at him. The vertical line on her forehead had been very prominent that day.

"Why you all wropped up in cobwebbies, sai?"

"Get out of here, ye impudent cull!" Aunt Cord cried. She had a good loud voice when she wanted to use it, and Sheemie jumped back from her in alarm. When she was sure he was headed back down the High Street toward town and had no intention of returning to their gate and hanging about in hopes of a tip, Aunt Cord had turned to Susan.

"Get those in some water before they wilt, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty, and don't go mooning about, wondering who yer secret admirer might be."

Then Aunt Cord had smiled. A *real* smile. What hurt Susan the most, confused her the most, was that her aunt was no cradle-story ogre, no witch like Rhea of the Coos. There was no monster here, only a maiden lady with some few social pretensions, a love of gold and silver, and a tear of being turned out, penniless, into the world.

"For folks such as us, Susie-pie," she said, speaking with a terrible heavy kindness, "'tis best to stick to our housework and leave dreams to them as can afford them."

## 5

She had been sure the flowers were from Will, and she was right. His note was written in a hand which was clear and passing fair.

Dear Susan Delgado,

I spoke out of turn the other night, and cry your pardon. May I see you and speak to you? It must be private. *This is a matter of importance*. If you will see me, get a message to the boy who brings this. He is safe.

Will Dearborn

A matter of importance. Underlined. She felt a strong desire to know what was so important to him, and cautioned herself against doing anything foolish. Perhaps he was smitten with her ... and if so, whose fault was that? Who had talked to him, ridden his horse, showed him her legs in a flashy carnival dismount? Who had put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him?

Her cheeks and forehead burned at the thought of that, and another hot ring seemed to go slipping down her body. She wasn't sure she regretted the kiss, but it had been a mistake, regrets or no regrets. Seeing him again now would be a worse one.

Yet she wanted to see him, and knew in her deepest heart that she was ready to set her anger at him aside. But there was the promise she had made.

The wretched promise.

That night she lay sleepless, tossing about in her bed, first thinking it would be better, more dignified, just to keep her silence, then composing mental notes anyway—some haughty, some cold, some with a lace-edge of flirtation.

When she heard the midnight bell ring, passing the old day out and calling the new one in, she decided enough was enough. She'd thrown herself from her bed, gone to her door, opened it, and thrust her head out into the hall. When she heard Aunt Cord's flutelike snores, she had closed her door again, crossed to her little desk by the window, and lit her lamp. She took one of her sheets of parchment paper from the top drawer, tore it in half (in Hambry, the only crime greater than wasting paper was wasting threaded stockline), and then wrote quickly, sensing that the slightest hesitation might condemn her to more hours of indecision. With no salutation and no signature, her response took only a breath to write:

*I may not see you. 'Twould not be proper.*

She had folded it small, blew out her lamp, and returned to bed with the note safely tucked under her pillow. She was asleep in two minutes. The following day, when the marketing took her to town, she had gone by the Travellers' Rest, which, at eleven in the morning, had all the charm of something which has died badly at the side of the road.

The saloon's door-yard was a beaten dirt square bisected by a long hitching rail with a watering trough beneath. Sheemie was trundling a wheelbarrow along the rail, picking up last night's horse-droppings with a shovel. He was wearing a comical pink *sombrero*, and singing "Golden Slippers." Susan doubted if many of the Rest's patrons would wake up feeling as well as Sheemie obviously did this morning ... so who, when you came right down to it, was more soft-headed? She looked around to make sure no one was paying heed to her, then went over to



Sheemie and tapped him on the shoulder. He looked frightened at first, and Susan didn't blame him—according to the stories she'd been hearing, Jonas's friend Depape had almost killed the poor kid for spilling a drink on his boots.

Then Sheemie recognized her. "Hello, Susan Delgado from out there by the edge of town," he said companionably. "It's a good day I wish you, sai."

He bowed—an amusing imitation of the Inner Baronies bow favored by his three new friends. Smiling, she dropped him a bit of curtsy (wearing jeans, she had to pretend at the skirt-holding part, but women in Mejis got used to curtseying in pretend skirts).

"See my flowers, sai?" he asked, and pointed toward the unpainted side of the Rest. What she saw touched her deeply: a line of mixed blue and white silkflowers growing along the base of the building. They looked both brave and pathetic, flurrying there in the faint morning breeze with the bald, turd-littered yard before them and the splintery public house behind them.

"Rid you grow those, Sheemie?"

"Aye, so I did. And Mr. Arthur Heath of Gilead has promised me yellow ones."

"I've never seen yellow silkflowers."

"Noey-no, me neither, but Mr. Arthur Heath says they have them in Gilead." He looked at Susan solemnly, the shovel held in his hands as a soldier would hold a gun or spear at port arms. "Mr. Arthur Heath saved my life. I'd do anything for him."

"Would you, Sheemie?" she asked, touched.

"Also, he has a lookout! It's a bird's head! And when he talks to it, tendy-pretend, do I laugh? Aye, fit to split!"

She looked around again to make sure no one was watching (save for the carved totems across the street), then removed her note, folded small, from her jeans pocket.

"Would you give this to Mr. Dearborn for me? He's also your friend, is he not?"

"Will? Aye!" He took the note and put it carefully into his own pocket.

"And tell no one."

"Shhhhh!" he agreed, and put a finger to his lips. His eyes had been amusingly round beneath the ridiculous pink lady's straw he wore. "Like when I brought you the flowers. Hushaboo!"

"That's right, hushaboo. Fare ye well, Sheemie."

"And you, Susan Delgado."

He went back to his cleanup operations. Susan had stood watching him for a moment, feeling uneasy and out of sorts with herself. Now that the note was successfully passed, she felt an urge to ask Sheemie to give it back, to scratch out what she had written, and promise to meet him. If only to see his steady blue eyes again, looking into her face.

Then Jonas's other friend, the one with the cloak, came sauntering out of the mercantile. She was sure he didn't see her—his head was down and he was rolling a cigarette—but she had no intention of pressing her luck. Reynolds talked to Jonas, and Jonas talked—all too much!—to Aunt Cord. If Aunt Cord heard she had been passing the time of day with the boy who had brought her the flowers, there were apt to be questions. Ones she didn't want to answer.

## 6

*All that's history now, Susan—water under the bridge. Best to get your thoughts out of the past.*

She brought Pylon to a stop and looked down the length of the Drop at the horses that moved and grazed there. Quite a surprising number of them this morning. It wasn't working. Her mind kept turning back to Will Dearborn.

What bad luck meeting him had been! If not for that chance encounter on her way back down from the Coos, she might well have made peace with her situation by now—she was a practical girl, after all, and a prom-ise was a promise. She certainly never would have expected herself to get all goosy-gushy over losing her maidenhead, and the prospect of carrying and bearing a child actually excited her. But Will Dearborn had changed things; had gotten into her head and now lodged there, a tenant who defied eviction. His remark to her as they danced stayed with her like a song you can't stop humming, even though you hate it. It had been cruel and stupidly self-righteous, that remark ... but was there not also a grain of truth in it? Rhea had been right about Hart Thorin, of that much Susan no longer had any doubt. She supposed that witches were right about men's lusts even when they were wrong about everything else. Not a happy thought, but likely a true one. It was Will Be Damned to You Dearborn who had made it difficult for her to accept what needed accepting, who had goaded her into arguments in which she

could hardly recognize her own shrill and desperate voice, who came to her in her dreams—dreams where he put his arms around her waist and kissed her, kissed her, kissed her.

She dismounted and walked downhill a little way with the reins looped in her fist. Pylon followed willingly enough, and when she stopped to look off into the blue haze to the southwest, he lowered his head and began to crop again.

She thought she needed to see Will Dearborn once more, if only to give her innate practicality a chance to reassert itself. She needed to see him at his right size, instead of the one her mind had created for him in her warm thoughts and warmer dreams. Once that was done, she could get on with her life and do what needed doing. Perhaps that was why she had taken this path—the same one she'd ridden yesterday, and the day before yesterday, and the day before that. He rode this part of the Drop; that much she had heard in the lower market.

She turned away from the Drop, suddenly knowing he would be there, as if her thought had called him—or her *ka*.

She saw only blue sky and low ridgeline hills that curved gently like the line of a woman's thigh and hip and waist as she lies on her side in bed. Susan felt a bitter disappointment fill her. She could almost taste it in her mouth, like wet tea leaves. She started back to Pylon, meaning to return to the house and take care of the apology she reckoned she must make. The sooner she did it, the sooner it would be done. She reached for her left stirrup, which was twisted a little, and as she did, a rider came over the horizon, breaking against the sky at the place which looked to her like a woman's hip. He sat there, only a silhouette on horseback, but she knew who it was at once.

*Run!* she told herself in a sudden panic. *Mount and gallop! Get out of here! Quickly! Before something terrible happens . . . before it really is ka, come like a wind to take you and all your plans over the sky and far away!*

She didn't run. She stood with Pylon's reins in one hand, and murmured to him when the *rosillo* looked up and nickered a greeting to the big bay-colored gelding coming down the hill.

Then Will was there, first above her and looking down, then dismounted in an easy, liquid motion she didn't think she could have matched, for all her years of horsemanship. This time there was no kicked-out leg and planted heel, no hat swept over a comically solemn bow; this time the gaze he gave her was steady and

serious and disquietingly adult.

They looked at each other in the Drop's big silence, Roland of Gilead and Susan of Mejis, and in her heart she felt a wind begin to blow. She feared it and welcomed it in equal measure.

7

"Goodmorn, Susan," he said. "I'm glad to see you again."

She said nothing, waiting and watching. Could he hear her heart beat-ing as clearly as she could? Of course not; that was so much romantic twaddle. Yet it still seemed to her that everything within a fifty-yard radius should be able to hear that thumping.

Will took a step forward. She took a step back, looking at him mis-trustfully. He lowered his head for a moment, then looked up again, his lips set.

"I cry your pardon," he said.

"Do you?" Her voice was cool.

"What I said that night was unwarranted."

At that she felt a spark of real anger. "I care not that it was unwar-ranted; I care that it was unfair. That it hurt me."

A tear overbrimmed her left eye and slipped down her cheek. She wasn't all cried out after all, it seemed.

She thought what she said would perhaps shame him, but although faint color came into his cheeks, his eyes remained firmly on hers.

"I fell in love with you," he said. "That's why I said it. It happened even before you kissed me, I think."

She laughed at that . . . but the simplicity with which he had spoken made her laughter sound false in her own ears. Tinny. "Mr. Dearborn—"

"Will. Please."

"Mr. Dearborn," she said, patiently as a teacher working with a dull student, "the idea is ridiculous. On the basis of one single meeting? One single kiss? A *sister's* kiss?" Now she was the one who was blush-ing, but she hurried on. "Such things happen in stories, but in real life? I think not."

But his eyes never left hers, and in them she saw some of Roland's truth: the deep romance of his nature, buried like a fabulous streak of alien metal in the granite of

his practicality. He accepted love as a fact rather than a flower, and it rendered her genial contempt powerless over both of them.

"I cry your pardon," he repeated. There was a kind of brute stubbornness in him. It exasperated her, amused her, and appalled her, all at the same time. "I don't ask you to return my love, that's not why I spoke. You told me your affairs were complicated . . ." Now his eyes did leave hers, and he looked off toward the Drop. He even laughed a little. "I called him a bit of a fool, didn't I? To your face. So who's the fool, after all?"

She smiled; couldn't help it. "Ye also said ye'd heard he was fond of strong drink and berry-girls."

Roland hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. If his friend Arthur Heath had done that, she would have taken it as a deliberate, comic gesture. Not with Will. She had an idea he wasn't much for comedy.

Silence between them again, this time not so uncomfortable. The two horses, Rusher and Pylon, cropping contentedly, side by side. *If we were horses, all this would be much easier*, she thought, and almost giggled.

"Mr. Dearborn, ye understand that I have agreed to an arrangement?"

"Aye." He smiled when she raised her eyebrows in surprise. "It's not mockery but the dialect. It just . . . seeps in."

"Who told ye of my business?"

"The Mayor's sister."

"Coral." She wrinkled her nose and decided she wasn't surprised. And she supposed there were others who could have explained her situation even more crudely. Eldred Jonas, for one. Rhea of the Coos, for another. Best to leave it. "So if ye understand, and if ye don't ask me to return your . . . whatever it is ye think ye feel . . . why are we talking? Why do ye seek me out? I think it makes ye passing uncomfortable—"

"Yes," he said, and then, as if stating a simple fact: "It makes me uncomfortable, all right. I can barely look at you and keep my head."

"Then mayhap it'd be best not to look, not to speak, not to think!" Her voice was both sharp and a little shaky. How could he have the courage to say such things, to just state them straight out and starey-eyed like that? "Why did ye send me the bouquet and that note? Are ye not aware of the trouble ye could've gotten me into? If y'knew my aunt. . . ! She's already spoken to me about ye, and if she knew about

the note ... or saw us to-gether out here ..."

She looked around, verifying that they were still unobserved. They were, at least as best she could tell. He reached out, touched her shoulder. She looked at him, and he pulled his fingers back as if he had put them on something hot.

"I said what I did so you'd understand," he said. "That's all. I feel how I feel, and you're not responsible for that."

*But I am, she thought. I kissed you. I think I'm more than a little re-sponsible for how we both feel. Will.*

"What I said while we were dancing I regret with all my heart. Won't you give me your pardon?"

"Aye," she said, and if he had taken her in his arms at that moment, she would have let him, and damn the consequences. But he only took off his hat and made her a charming little bow, and the wind died.

"Thankee-sai."

"Don't call me that. I hate it. My name is Susan."

"Will you call me Will?"

She nodded.

"Good. Susan, I want to ask you something—not as the fellow who insulted you and hurt you because he was jealous. This is something else entirely. May I?"

"Aye, I suppose," she said warily.

"Are you for the Affiliation?"

She looked at him, flabbergasted. It was the last question in the world she had expected . . . but he was looking at her seriously.

"I'd expected ye and yer friends to count cows and guns and spears and boats and who knows what else," she said, "but I didn't think thee would also count Affiliation supporters."

She saw his look of surprise, and a little smile at the comers of his mouth. This time the smile made him look older than he could possibly be. Susan thought back across what she'd just said, realized what must have struck him, and gave a small, embarrassed laugh. "My aunt has a way of lapsing into thee and thou. My father did, too. It's from a sect of the Old People who called themselves Friends."

"I know. We have the Friendly Folk in my part of the world still."

"Do you?"

"Yes ... or aye, if you like the sound of that better; I'm coming to. And I like the

way the Friends talk. It has a lovely sound."

"Not when my aunt uses it," Susan said, thinking back to the argument over the shirt. "To answer your question, aye—I'm for the Affiliation, I suppose. Because my da was. If ye ask am I *strong* for the Affiliation, I suppose not. We see and hear little enough of them, these days. Mostly rumors and stories carried by drifters and far-travelling drummers. Now that there's no railway ..." She shrugged.

"Most of the ordinary day-to-day folk I've spoken to seem to feel the same. And yet your Mayor Thorin—"

"He's not *my* Mayor Thorin," she said, more sharply than she had intended.

"And yet the *Barony's* Mayor Thorin has given us every help we've asked for, and some we haven't. I have only to snap my fingers, and Kimba Rimer stands before me."

"Then don't snap them," she said, looking around in spite of herself. She tried to smile and show it was a joke, but didn't make much success of it.

"The townsfolk, the fisherfolk, the farmers, the cowboys . . . they all speak well of the Affiliation, but distantly. Yet the Mayor, his Chancellor, and the members of the Horsemen's Association, Lengyll and Garber and that lot—"

"I know them," she said shortly.

"They're absolutely enthusiastic in their support. Mention the Affiliation to Sheriff Avery and he all but dances. In every ranch parlor we're offered a drink from an Eld commemorative cup, it seems."

"A drink of what?" she asked, a trifle roguishly. "Beer? Ale? *Graf*?"

"Also wine, whiskey, and pettibone," he said, not responding to her smile. "It's almost as if they wish us to break our vow. Does that strike you as strange?"

"Aye, a little; or just as Hambry hospitality. In these parts, when someone—especially a young man—says he's taken the pledge, folks tend to think him coy, not serious."

"And this joyful support of the Affiliation amongst the movers and the shakers? How does *that* strike you?"

"Queer."

And it did. Pat Delgado's work had brought him in almost daily contact with these landowners and horsebreeders, and so she, who had tagged after her da any time he would let her, had seen plenty of them. She thought them a cold bunch, by and

large. She couldn't imagine John Croydon or Jake White waving an Arthur Eldstein in a sentimental toast... especially not in the middle of the day, when there was stock to be run and sold.

Will's eyes were full upon her, as if he were reading these thoughts.

"But you probably don't see as much of the big fellas as you once did," he said.

"Before your father passed, I mean."

"Perhaps not. . . but do bumblebees learn to speak backward?"

No cautious smile this time; this time he outright grinned. It lit his whole face.

Gods, how handsome he was! "I suppose not. No more than cats change their spots, as we say. And Mayor Thorin doesn't speak of such as us—me and my friends—to you when you two are alone? Or is that question beyond what I have a right to ask? I suppose it is."

"I care not about that," she said, tossing her head pertly enough to make her long braid swing. "I understand little of propriety, as some have been good enough to point out." But she didn't care as much for his down-cast look and flush of embarrassment as she had expected. She knew girls who liked to tease as well as flirt and to tease hard, some of them- but it seemed she had no taste for it.

Certainly she had no desire to set her claws in him, and when she went on, she spoke gently. "I'm not alone with him, in any case."

*And oh how ye do lie*, she thought mournfully, remembering how Thorin had embraced her in the hall on the night of the party, groping at her breasts like a child trying to get his hand into a candy-jar; telling her that he burned for her. *Oh ye great liar*.

"In any case, Will, Hart's opinion of you and yer friends can hardly concern ye, can it? Ye have a job to do, that's all. If he helps ye, why not just accept and be grateful?"

"Because something's wrong here," he said, and the serious, almost somber quality of his voice frightened her a little.

"Wrong? With the Mayor? With the Horsemen's Association? What are ye talking about?"

He looked at her steadily, then seemed to decide something. "I'm go-ing to trust you, Susan."

"I'm not sure I want thy trust any more than I want thy love," she said.

He nodded. "And yet, to do the job I was sent to do, I have to trust *someone*. Can



you understand that?"

She looked into his eyes, then nodded.

He stepped next to her, so close she fancied she could feel the warmth of his skin.

"Look down there. Tell me what you see."

She looked, then shrugged. "The Drop. Same as always." She smiled a little. "And as beautiful. This has always been my favorite place in all the world."

"Aye, it's beautiful, all right. What else do you see?"

"Horses, of courses." She smiled to show this was a joke (an old one of her da's, in fact), but he didn't smile back. Fair to look at, and courageous, if the stories they were already telling about town were true—quick in both thought and movement, too. Really not much sense of humor, though. Well, there were worse failings. Grabbing a girl's bosom when she wasn't expecting it might be one of them.

"Horses. Yes. But does it look like the right *number* of them? You've been seeing horses on the Drop all your life, and surely no one who's not in the Horsemen's Association is better qualified to say."

"And ye don't trust them?"

"They've given us everything we've asked for, and they're as friendly as dogs under the dinner-table, but no—I don't think I do."

"Yet ye'd trust me."

He looked at her steadily with his beautiful and frightening eyes—a darker blue than they would later be, not yet faded out by the suns of ten thousand drifting days. "I have to trust someone," he repeated.

She looked down, almost as though he had rebuked her. He reached out, put gentle fingers beneath her chin, and tipped her face up again. "Does it seem the right number? Think carefully!"

But now that he'd brought it to her attention, she hardly needed to think about it at all. She had been aware of the change for some time, she supposed, but it had been gradual, easy to overlook.

"No," she said at last. "It's not right."

"Too few or too many? Which?"

She paused for a moment. Drew in breath. Let it out in a long sigh. "Too many. Far too many."

Will Dearborn raised his clenched fists to shoulder-height and gave them a single hard shake. His blue eyes blazed like the spark-lights of which her grand-da had

told her. "I knew it," he said. "I *knew* it."

8

"How many horses are down there?" he asked.

"Below us? Or on the whole Drop?"

"Just below us."

She looked carefully, making no attempt to actually count. That didn't work; it only confused you. She saw four good-sized groups of about twenty horses each, moving about on the green almost exactly as birds moved about in the blue above them. There were perhaps nine smaller groups, ranging from octets to quartets ... several pairs (they reminded her of lovers, but everything did today, it seemed) ... a few galloping loners—young stallions, mostly . . .

"A hundred and sixty?" he asked in a low, almost hesitant voice.

She looked at him, surprised. "Aye. A hundred sixty's the number I had in mind. To a pin."

"And how much of the Drop are we looking at? A quarter? A third?"

"Much less." She tilted him a small smile. "As I think thee knows. A sixth of the total open graze, perhaps."

"If there are a hundred and sixty horses free-grazing on each sixth, that comes to .. ."

She waited for him to come up with nine hundred and sixty. When he did, she nodded. He looked down a moment longer, and grunted with surprise when Rusher nosed him in the small of the back. Susan put a curled hand to her mouth to stifle a laugh. From the impatient way he pushed the horse's muzzle away, she guessed he still saw little that was funny.

"How many more are stabled or training or working, do you reckon?" he asked.

"One for every three down there. At a guess."

"So we'd be talking twelve hundred head of horses. All threaded stock, no muties." She looked at him with faint surprise. "Aye. There's almost no mutie stock here in Mejis ... in *any* of the Outer Baronies, for that matter."

"You true-breed more than three out of every five?"

"We breed em *all!* Of course every now and then we get a freak that has to be put down, but—"

"Not one freak out of every five livebirths? One out of five born with—" How had Renfrew put it? "With extra legs or its guts on the outside?"

Her shocked look was enough answer. "Who's been telling ye such?"

"Renfrew. He also told me that there was about five hundred and sev-enty head of threaded stock here in Mejis."

"That's just . . ." She gave a bewildered little laugh. "Just crazy! If my da was here—"

"But he's not," Roland said, his tone as dry as a snapping twig. "He's dead."

For a moment she seemed not to register the change in that tone. Then, as if an eclipse had begun to happen somewhere inside her head, her entire aspect darkened. "My da had an accident. Do you understand that, Will Dearborn? An *accident*. It was terribly sad, but the sort of thing that happens, sometimes. A horse rolled on him. Ocean Foam. Fran says Foam saw a snake in the grass."

"Fran Lengyll?"

"Aye." Her skin was pale, except for two wild roses—pink, like those in the bouquet he'd sent her by way of Sheemie—glowing high up on her cheekbones.

"Fran rode many miles with my father. They weren't great friends—they were of different classes, for one thing—but they rode to-gether. I've a cap put away somewhere that Fran's first wife made for my christening. They rode the trail together. I can't believe Fran Lengyll would lie about how my da died, let alone that he had ... anything to do with it."

Yet she looked doubtfully down at the running horses. So many. *Too* many. Her da would have seen. And her da would have wondered what she was wondering now: whose brands were on the extras?

"It so happens Fran Lengyll and my friend Stockworth had a discus-sion about horses," Will said. His voice sounded almost casual, but there was nothing casual on his face. "Over glasses of spring water, after beer had been offered and refused. They spoke of them much as I did with Renfrew at Mayor Thorin's welcoming dinner. When Richard asked sai Lengyll to estimate riding horses, he said perhaps four hundred."

"Insane."

"It would seem so," Will agreed.

"Do they not kennit the horses are out here where ye can see em?"

"They know we've barely gotten started," he said, "and that we've begun with the

fisherfolk. We'll be a month yet, I'm sure they think, before we start to concern ourselves with the horseflesh hereabouts. And in the meantime, they have an attitude about us of... how shall I put it? Well, never mind how I'd put it. I'm not very good with words, but my friend Arthur calls it 'genial contempt.' They leave the horses out in front of our eyes, I think, because they don't believe we'll know what we're looking at. Or because they think we won't believe what we're seeing. I'm very glad I found you out here."

*Just so I could give you a more accurate horse-count? Is that the only reason?*

"But ye *will* get around to counting the horses. Eventually. I mean, that must surely be one of the Affiliation's main needs."

He gave her an odd look, as if she had missed something that should have been obvious. It made her feel self-conscious.

"What? What is it?"

"Perhaps they expect the extra horses to be gone by the time we get around to this side of the Barony's business."

"Gone *where*?"

"I don't know. But I don't like this. Susan, you will keep this just between the two of us, won't you?"

She nodded. *She'd* be insane to tell anyone she had been with Will Dearborn, unchaperoned except by Rusher and Pylon, out on the Drop.

"It may all turn out to be nothing, but if it doesn't, knowing could be dangerous." Which led back to her da again. Lengyll had told her and Aunt Cord that Pat had been thrown, and that Ocean Foam had then rolled upon him. Neither of them had had any reason to doubt the man's story. But Fran Lengyll had also told Will's friend that there were only four hundred head of riding stock in Mejis, and that was a bald lie.

Will turned to his horse, and she was glad.

Part of her wanted him to stay—to stand close to her while the clouds sent their long shadows flying across the grassland—but they had been together out here too long already. There was no reason to think anyone would come along and see them, but instead of comforting her, that idea for some reason made her more nervous than ever.

He straightened the stirrup hanging beside the scabbarded shaft of his lance (Rusher whickered way back in his throat, as if to say *About time we got going*),

then turned to her again. She felt actually faint as his gaze fell upon her, and now the idea of *ka* was almost too strong to deny. She tried to tell herself it was just the dim—that feeling of having lived a thing before—but it wasn't the dim; it was a sense of finding a road one had been searching for all along.

"There's something else I want to say. I don't like returning to where we started, but I must."

"No," she said faintly. "That's closed, surely."

"I told you that I loved you, and that I was jealous," he said, and for the first time his voice had come unanchored a little, wavering in his throat. She was alarmed to see that there were tears standing in his eyes. "There was more. Something more."

"Will, I don't want to—" She turned blindly for her horse. He took her shoulder and turned her back. It wasn't a harsh touch, but there was an inexorability to it that was dreadful. She looked helplessly up into his face, saw that he was young and far from home, and suddenly understood she could not stand against him for long. She wanted him so badly that she ached with it. She would have given a year of her life just to be able to put her palms on his cheeks and feel his skin.

"You miss your father, Susan?"

"Aye," she whispered. "With all my heart I do."

"I miss my mother the same way." He held her by both shoulders now. One eye overbrimmed; one tear drew a silver line down his cheek.

"Is she dead?"

"No, but something happened. About her. To her. *Shit!* How can I talk about it when I don't even know how to *think* about it? In a way, she *did* die. For me."

"Will, that's terrible."

He nodded. "The last time I saw her, she looked at me in a way that will haunt me to my grave. Shame and love and hope, all of them bound up together. Shame at what I'd seen and knew about her, hope, maybe, that I'd understand and forgive . . ."

He took a deep breath. "The night of the party, toward the end of the meal, Rimer said something funny. You all laughed—"

"If I did, it was only because it would have looked strange if I was the only one who didn't," Susan said. "I don't like him. I think he's a schemer and a conniver."

"You all laughed, and I happened to look down toward the end of the table.

Toward Olive Thorin. And for a moment—only a moment—I thought she was my mother. The expression was the same, you see. The same one I saw on the

morning when I opened the wrong door at the wrong time and came upon my mother and her—"

"Stop it!" she cried, pulling back from his hands. Inside her, every-thing was suddenly in motion, all the mooring-lines and buckles and clamps she'd been using to hold herself together seeming to melt at once. "Stop it, just stop it, I can't listen to you talk about her!"

She groped out for Pylon, but now the whole world was wet prisms. She began to sob. She felt his hands on her shoulders, turning her again, and she did not resist them.

"I'm so ashamed," she said. "I'm so ashamed and so frightened and I'm sorry. I've forgotten my father's face and . . . and ..."

*And I'll never be able to find it again,* she wanted to say, but she didn't have to say anything. He stopped her mouth with his kisses. At first she just let herself be kissed . . . and then she was kissing him back, kiss-ing him almost furiously. She wiped the wetness from beneath his eyes with soft little sweeps of her thumbs, then slipped her palms up his cheeks as she had longed to do. The feeling was exquisite; even the soft rasp of the stubble close to the skin was exquisite. She slid her arms around his neck, her open mouth on his, holding him and kissing him as hard as she could, kissing him there between the horses, who simply looked at each other and then went back to cropping grass.

## 9

They were the best kisses of his whole life, and never forgotten: the yield-ing pliancy of her lips and the strong shape of her teeth under them, ur-gent and not shy in the least; the fragrance of her breath, the sweet line of her body pressed against his. He slipped a hand up to her left breast, squeezed it gently, and felt her heart speeding under it. His other hand went to her hair and combed along the side of it, silk at her temple. He never forgot its texture.

Then she was standing away from him, her face flaming with blush and passion, one hand going to her lips, which he had kissed until they were swollen. A little trickle of blood ran from the comer of the lower one. Her eyes, wide on his. Her bosom rising and falling as if she had just run a race. And between them a current that was like nothing he had ever felt in his life. It ran like a river and shook like a

fever.

"No more," she said in a trembling voice. "No more, please. If you really do love me, don't let me dishonor myself. I've made a promise. Anything might come later, after that promise was fulfilled, I suppose . . . if you still wanted me . . ."

"I would wait forever," he said calmly, "and do anything for you but stand away and watch you go with another man."

"Then if you love me, go away from me. Please, Will!"

"Another kiss."

She stepped forward at once, raising her face trustingly up to his, and he understood he could do whatever he wanted with her. She was, at least for the moment, no longer her own mistress; she might consequently be his. He could do to her what Marten had done to his own mother, if that was his fancy.

The thought broke his passion apart, turned it to coals that fell in a bright shower, winking out one by one in a dark bewilderment. His father's acceptance (*I have known for two years*)

was in many ways the worst part of what had happened to him this year; how could he fall in love with this girl—any girl—in a world where such evils of the heart seemed necessary, and might even be repeated?

Yet he did love her.

Instead of the passionate kiss he wanted, he placed his lips lightly on the corner of her mouth where the little rill of blood flowed. He kissed, tasting salt like the taste of his own tears. He closed his eyes and shivered when her hand stroked the hair at the nape of his neck.

"I'd not hurt Olive Thorin for the world," she whispered in his ear. "No more than I'd hurt thee, Will. I didn't understand, and now 'tis too late to be put right. But thank you for not... not taking what you could. And I'll remember you always. How it was to be kissed by you. It's the best thing that ever happened to me, I think. Like heaven and earth all wrapped up together, aye."

"I'll remember, too." He watched her swing up into the saddle, and remembered how her bare legs had flashed in the dark on the night he had met her. And suddenly he couldn't let her go. He reached forward, touched **her** boot.

"Susan—"

"No," she said. "Please."

He stood back. Somehow.

"This is our secret," she said. "Yes?"

"Aye."

She smiled at that ... but it was a sad smile. "Stay away from me from now on, Will. Please. And I'll stay away from you."

He thought about it. "If we can."

"We must, Will. We must."

She rode away fast. Roland stood beside Rusher's stirrup, watching her go. And when she was out of sight over the horizon, still he watched.

## 10

Sheriff Avery, Deputy Dave, and Deputy George Riggins were sitting on the porch in front of the Sheriff's office and jail when Mr. Stockworth and Mr. Heath (the latter with that idiotic bird's skull still mounted on the horn of his saddle) went past at a steady walk. The bell o' noon had rung fifteen minutes before, and Sheriff Avery reckoned they were on their way to lunch, perhaps at The Millbank, or perhaps at the Rest, which put on a fair noon meal. Popkins and such. Avery liked something a little more filling; half a chicken or a haunch of beef suited him just fine.

Mr. Heath gave them a wave and a grin. "Good day, gents! Long life! Gentle breezes! Happy siestas!"

They waved and smiled back. When they were out of sight, Dave said: "They spent all mornin down there on the piers, countin nets. *Nets!* Do you believe it?"

"Yessir," Sheriff Avery said, lifting one massive cheek a bit out of his rocker and letting off a noisy pre-luncheon fart. "Yessir, I do. Aye."

George said: "If not for them facing off Jonas's boys the way they done, I'd think they was a pack of fools."

"Nor would they likely mind," Avery said. He looked at Dave, who was twirling his monocle on the end of its ribbon and looking off in the direction the boys had taken. There were folks in town who had begun calling the Affiliation brats Little Coffin Hunters. Avery wasn't sure what to make of that. He'd soothed it down between them and Thorin's hard boys, and had gotten both a commendation and a piece of gold from Rimer for his efforts, but still. . . what to make of them?

"The day they came in," he said to Dave, "ye thought they were soft. How do ye



say now?"

"Now?" Dave twirled his monocle a final time, then popped it in his eye and stared at the Sheriff through it. "Now I think they might have been a little harder than I thought, after all."

*Yes indeed, Avery thought. But hard don't mean smart, thank the gods. Aye, thank the gods for that.*

"I'm hungry as a bull, so I am," he said, getting up. He bent, put his hands on his knees, and ripped off another loud fart. Dave and George looked at each other. George fanned a hand in front of his face. Sheriff Herkimer Avery, Barony Sheriff, straightened up, looking both relieved and anticipatory. "More room out than there is in," he said. "Come on, boys. Let's go downstreet and tuck into a little."

## 11

Not even sunset could do much to improve the view from the porch of the Bar K bunkhouse. The building—except for the cook-shack and the stable, the only one still standing on what had been the home acre—was L-shaped, and the porch was built on the inside of the short arm. Left for them on it had been just the right number of seats: two splintery rockers and a wooden crate to which an unstable board back had been nailed.

On this evening. Alain sat in one of the rockers and Cuthbert sat on the box-seat, which he seemed to fancy. On the rail, peering across the beaten dirt of the dooryard and toward the burned-out hulk of the Garber home place, was the lookout.

Alain was bone-tired, and although both of them had bathed in the stream near the west end of the home acre, he thought he still smelled fish and seaweed on himself. They had spent the day counting nets. He was not averse to hard work, even when it was monotonous, but he didn't like pointless work. Which this was. Hambry came in two parts: the fishers and the horse-breeders. There was nothing for them among the fishers, and after three weeks all three of them knew it. Their answers were out on the Drop, at which they had so far done no more than look. At Roland's order.

The wind gusted, and for a moment they could hear the low, grum-bling,

squealing sound of the thinny.

"I hate that sound," Alain said.

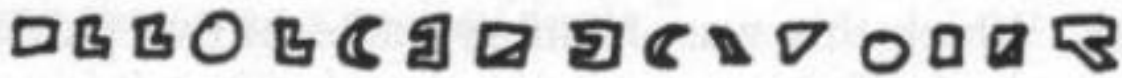
Cuthbert, unusually silent and introspective tonight, nodded and said only "Aye." They were all saying that now, not to mention *So you do* and *So I am* and *So it is*. Alain suspected the three of them would have Ham-bry on their tongues long after they had wiped its dust from their boots.

From behind them, inside the bunkhouse door, came a less unpleasant sound—the cooing of pigeons. And then, from around the side of the bunkhouse, a third, for which he and Cuthbert had unconsciously been listening as they sat watching the sun go down: horse's hoofs. Rusher's.

Roland came around the comer, riding easy, and as he did, something happened that struck Alain as oddly portentous ... a kind of omen. There was a flurry-flutter of wings, a dark shape in the air, and suddenly a bird was roosting on Roland's shoulder.

He didn't jump; barely looked around. He rode up to the hitching rail and sat there, holding out his hand. "Hile," he said softly, and the pigeon stepped into his palm. Bound to one of its legs was a capsule. Roland re-moved it, opened it, and took out a tiny strip of paper, which had been rolled tight. In his other hand he held the pigeon out.

"Hile," Alain said, holding out his own hand. The pigeon flew to it. As Roland dismounted, Alain took the pigeon into the bunkhouse, where the cages had been placed beneath an open window. He ungated the cen-ter one and held out his hand. The pigeon which had just arrived hopped in; the pigeon in the cage hopped out and into his palm. Alain shut the cage door, latched it, crossed the room, and turned up the pillow of Bert's bunk. Beneath it was a linen envelope containing a number of blank paper strips and a tiny storage-pen. He took one of the strips and the pen, which held its own small reservoir of ink and did not have to be dipped. He went back out on the porch. Roland and Cuthbert were studying the unrolled strip of paper the pigeon had delivered from Gilead. On it was a line of tiny geometric shapes:



"What does it say?" Alain asked. The code was simple enough, but he could not get it by heart or read it on sight, as Roland and Bert had been able to, almost immediately. Alain's talents—his ability to track, his easy access to the touch—lay in other directions.

" 'Farson moves east,' " Cuthbert read. " 'Forces split, one big, one small. Do you see anything unusual.' " He looked at Roland, almost offended. "Anything unusual, what does that mean?"

Roland shook his head. He didn't know. He doubted if the men who had sent the message—of whom his own father was almost surely one— did, either.

Alain handed Cuthbert the strip and the pen. With one finger Bert stroked the head of the softly cooing pigeon. It ruffled its wings as if already anxious to be off to the west.

"What shall I write?" Cuthbert asked. "The same?"

Roland nodded.

"But we *have* seen things that are unusual!" Alain said. "And we know things are wrong here! The horses ... and at that small ranch way south ... I can't remember the name . . ."

Cuthbert could. "The Rocking H."

"Aye, the Rocking H. There are *oxen* there. *Oxen!* My gods, I've never seen them, except for pictures in a book!"

Roland looked alarmed. "Does anyone know you saw?"

Alain shrugged impatiently. "I don't think so. There were drovers about—three, maybe four—"

"Four, aye," Cuthbert said quietly.

"—but they paid no attention to us. Even when we see things, they think we don't."

"And that's the way it must stay." Roland's eyes swept them, but there was a kind of absence in his face, as if his thoughts were far away. He turned to look toward the sunset, and Alain saw something on the collar of his shirt. He plucked it, a

move made so quickly and nimbly that not even Roland felt it. *Bert couldn't have done that*, Alain thought with some pride.

"Aye, but—"

"Same message," Roland said. He sat down on the top step and looked off toward the evening redness in the west. "Patience, Mr. Richard Stock-worth and Mr. Arthur Heath. We know certain things and we believe certain other things. But would John Farson come all this way simply to resupply horses? I don't think so. I'm not sure, horses are valuable, aye, so they are . . . but I'm not sure. So we wait."

"All right, all right, same message." Cuthbert smoothed the scrap of paper flat on the porch rail, then made a small series of symbols on it. Alain could read this message; he had seen the same sequence several times since they had come to Hambry. "Message received. We are fine. Nothing to report at this time."

The message was put in the capsule and attached to the pigeon's leg. Alain went down the steps, stood beside Rusher (still waiting patiently to be unsaddled), and held the bird up toward the fading sunset. "Hile!"

It was up and gone in a flutter of wings. For a moment only they saw it, a dark shape against the deepening sky.

Roland sat looking after. The dreamy expression was still on his face. Alain found himself wondering if Roland had made the right decision this evening. He had never in his life had such a thought. Nor expected to have one.

"Roland?"

"Hmmm?" Like a man half-awakened from some deep sleep.

"I'll unsaddle him, if you want." He nodded at Rusher. "And rub him down."

No answer for a long time. Alain was about to ask again when Roland said, "No. I'll do it. In a minute or two." And went back to looking at the sunset.

Alain climbed the porch steps and sat down in his rocker. Bert had resumed his place on the box-seat. They were behind Roland now, and Cuthbert looked at Alain with his eyebrows raised. He pointed to Roland and then looked at Alain again.

Alain passed over what he had plucked from Roland's collar. Although it was almost too fine to be seen in this light, Cuthbert's eyes were gunslinger's eyes, and he took it easily, with no fumbling.

It was a long strand of hair, the color of spun gold. He could see from Bert's, face

that Bert knew whose head it had come from. Since arriving in Hambry, they'd met only one girl with long blonde hair. The two boys' eyes met. In Bert's Alain saw dismay and laughter in equal measure.

Cuthbert Allgood raised his forefinger to his temple and mimed pulling the trigger. Alain nodded.

Sitting on the steps with his back to them, Roland looked toward the dying sunset with dreaming eyes.

## CHAPTER VIII

### BENEATH THE PEDDLER'S MOON

#### 1

The town of Ritzy, nearly four hundred miles west of Mejis, was anything but. Roy Depape reached it three nights before the Peddler's Moon—called Late-summer's Moon by some—came full, and left it a day later.

Ritzy was, in fact, a miserable little mining village on the eastern slope of the Vi Castis Mountains, about fifty miles from Vi Castis Cut. The town had but one street; it was engraved with iron-hard wheelruts now, and would become a lake of mud roughly three days after the storms of autumn set in. There was the Bear and Turtle Mercantile & Sundrie Items, where miners were forbidden by the Vi Castis Company to shop, and a company store where no one but grubbies *would* shop; there was a com-bined jailhouse and Town Gathering Hall with a windmill-cum-gallows out front; there were six roaring barrooms, each more sordid, desperate,

and dangerous than the last.

Ritzy was like an ugly lowered head between a pair of huge shrugged shoulders—the foothills. Above town to the south were the clapped-out shacks where the Company housed its miners; each puff of breeze brought the stench of their unlimed communal privies. To the north were the mines themselves: dangerous, undershored scratch drifts that went down fifty feet or so and then spread like fingers clutching for gold and silver and copper and the occasional nest of firedims. From the outside they were just holes punched into the bare and rocky earth, holes like staring eyes, each with its own pile of till and scrapings beside the adit.

Once there had been freehold mines up there, but they were all gone, regulated out by the Vi Castis Company. Depape knew all about it, because the Big Coffin Hunters had been a part of that little spin and raree. Just after he'd hooked up with Jonas and Reynolds, that had been. Why, they had gotten those coffins tattooed on their hands not fifty miles from here, in the town of Wind, a mudpen even less ritzy than Ritzy. How long ago? He couldn't rightly say, although it seemed to him that he should be able to. But when it came to reckoning times past, Depape often felt lost. It was hard even to remember how old he was. Because the world had moved on, and time was different, now. *Softer.*

One thing he had no trouble remembering at all—his recollection was refreshed by the miserable flare of pain he suffered each time he bumped his wounded finger. That one thing was a promise to himself that he would see Dearborn, Stockworth, and Heath laid out dead in a row, hand to out-stretched hand like a little girl's paper dolls. He intended to unlimber the part of him which had longed so bootlessly for Her Nibs these last three weeks and use it to hose down their dead faces. The majority of his squirt would be saved for Arthur Heath of Gilead, New Canaan. That laughing chatterbox motherfucker had a *serious* hosing-down coming.

Depape rode out the sunrise end of Ritzy's only street, trotted his horse up the flank of the first hill, and paused at the top for a single look back. Last night, when he'd been talking to the old bastard behind Hattigan's, Ritzy had been roaring. This morning at seven, it looked as ghostly as the Peddler's Moon, which still hung in the sky above the rim of the plundered hills. He could hear the mines tink-tonking away, though. You bet. Those babies tink-tonked away seven days a week. No rest

for the wicked . . . and he supposed that included him. He dragged his horse's head around with his usual unthinking and ham-handed force, booted its flanks, and headed east, thinking of the old bastard as he went. He had treated the old bastard passing fair, he reckoned. A reward had been promised, and had been paid for information given.

"Yar," Depape said, his glasses flashing in the new sun (it was a rare morning when he had no hangover, and he felt quite cheerful), "I reckon the old bugger can't complain."

Depape had had no trouble following the young culls' backtrail; they had come east on the Great Road the whole way from New Canaan, it appeared, and at every town where they had stopped, they had been marked. In most they were marked if they did no more than pass through. And why not? Young men on good horses, no scars on their faces, no regulator tattoos on their hands, good clothes on their backs, expensive hats on their heads. They were remembered especially well at the inns and saloons, where they had stopped to refresh themselves but had drunk no hard liquor. No beer or *graf*, either, for that matter. Yes, they were remembered. Boys on the road, boys that seemed almost to shine. As if they had come from an earlier, better time.

*Piss in their faces*, Depape thought as he rode. *One by one. Mr. Arthur "Ha-Ha" Heath last. I'll save enough so it 'd drown you, were you not already at the end of the path and into the clearing.*

They had been noticed, all right, but that wasn't good enough—if he went back to Hambry with no more than that, Jonas would likely shoot his nose off. And he would deserve it. *They may be rich boys, but that's not all they are.* Depape had said that himself. The question was, what else were they? And finally, in the shit-and-sulfur stench of Ritzy, he had found out. Not everything, perhaps, but enough to allow him to turn his horse around before he found himself all the way back in fucking New Canaan.

He had hit two other saloons, sipping watered beer in each, before rolling into Hattigan's. He ordered yet another watered beer, and prepared to engage the bartender in conversation. Before he even began to shake the tree, however, the apple he wanted fell off and dropped into his hand, neat as you please.

It was an old man's voice (an old *bastard's* voice), speaking with the shrill, head-hurting intensity which is the sole province of old bastards in their cups. He was

talking about the old days, as old bastards always did, and about how the world had moved on, and how things had been ever so much better when he was a boy. Then he had said something which caused Depape's ears to prick up: something about how the old days might be coming again, for hadn't he seen three young lords not two months a-gone, mayhap less, and even bought one of them a drink, even if 'twas only sasparilly soda?

"You wouldn't know a young lord from a young turd," said a miss who appeared to have all of four teeth left in her charming young head.

There was general laughter at this. The old bastard looked around, of-fended. "I know, all right," he said. "I've forgot more than you'll ever learn, so I have. One of them at least came from the Eld line, for I saw his father in his face . . . just as clear as I see your saggy tits, Jolene." And then the old bastard had done something Depape rather admired—yanked out the front of the saloon-whore's blouse and poured the remainder of his beer down it. Even the roars of laughter and heavy applause which greeted this couldn't entirely drown the girl's caw of rage, or the old man's cries when she began to slap and punch him about the head and shoulders. These latter cries were only indignant at first, **but** when the girl grabbed the old bastard's own beer-stein and shattered it against the side of his head, they became screams of pain. Blood—mixed with a few wa-tery dregs of beer—began to run down the old bastard's face.

"Get out of here!" she yelled, and gave him a shove toward the door. Several healthy kicks from the miners in attendance (who had changed sides as easily as the wind changes directions) helped him along. "And don't come back! I can smell the weed on your breath, you old cock-sucker! Get out and take your gods-cussed stories of old days and young lords with you!"

The old bastard was in such manner conveyed across the room, past the tootling trumpet-player who served as entertainment for the patrons of Hattigan's (that young bowler-hatted worthy added his own kick in the seat of the old bastard's dusty trousers without ever missing so much as a single note of "Play, Ladies, Play"), and out through the batwing doors, where he collapsed face-first into the street.

Depape had sauntered after him and helped him up. As he did so, he smelled an acrid odor—not beer—on the old man's breath, and saw the telltale greenish-gray discolorations at the comers of his lips. Weed, all right. The old bastard was



probably just getting started on it (and for the usual reason: devil-grass was free in the hills, unlike the beer and whiskey that was sold in town), but once they started, the finish came quick.

"They got no respect," the old bastard said thickly. "Nor understand-ing, either."

"Aye, so they don't," said Depape, who had not yet gotten the accents of the seacoast and the Drop out of his speech.

The old bastard stood swaying, looking up at him, wiping ineffectu-ally at the blood which ran down his wrinkled cheeks from his lacerated scalp. "Son, do you have the price of a drink? Remember the face of your father and give an old soul the price of a drink!"

"I'm not much for charity, old-timer," Depape said, "but mayhap you could earn yourself the price of a drink. Step on over here, into my office, and let's us see." He'd led the old bastard out of the street and back to the boardwalk, angling well to the left of the black batwings with their golden shafts of light spilling out above and below. He waited for a trio of miners to go by, singing at the top of their lungs (*"Woman I love... is long and tall... she moves her body... like a cannonball... "*), and then, still holding the old bastard by the elbow, hail guided him into the alley between Hatti-gan's and the undertaking establishment next door. For some people, De-pape mused, a visit to Ritzy could damn near amount to one-stop shopping: get your drink, get your bullet, get laid out next door.

"Yer office," the old bastard cackled as Depape led him down the al-ley toward the board fence and the heaps of rubbish at the far end. The wind blew, stinging Depape's nose with odors of sulfur and carbolic from the mines. From their right, the sounds of drunken revelry pounded through the side of Hattigan's. "Your office, that's good."

"Aye, my office."

The old man gazed at him in the light of the moon, which rode the slot of sky above the alley. "Are you from Mejis? Or Tepachi?"

"Maybe one, maybe t'other, maybe neither."

"Do I know you?" The old bastard was looking at him even more closely, standing on tiptoe as if hoping for a kiss. Ugh.

Depape pushed him away. "Not so close, dad." Yet he felt marginally encouraged. He and Jonas and Reynolds *had* been here before, and if the old man remembered his face, likely he wasn't talking through his hat about fellows he'd seen much

more recently.

"Tell me about the three young lords, old dad." Depape rapped on the wall of Hattigan's. "Them in there may not be interested, but I am."

The old bastard looked at him with a bleary, calculating eye. "Might there be a bit o' metal in it for me?"

"Yar," Depape said. "If you tell me what I want to hear, I'll give you metal."

"Gold?"

"Tell me, and we'll see."

"No, sir. Dicker first, tell second."

Depape seized him by the arm, whirled him around, and yanked a wrist which felt like a bundle of sticks up to the old bastard's scrawny shoulderblades. "Fuck with me, dad, and we'll start by breaking your arm."

"Let go!" the old bastard screamed breathlessly. "Let go, I'll trust to your generosity, young sir, for you have a generous face! Yes! Yes indeed!"

Depape let him go. The old bastard eyed him warily, rubbing his shoulder. In the moonlight the blood drying on his cheeks looked black.

"Three of them, there were," he said. "Fine-born lads."

"Lads or lords? Which is it, dad?"

The old bastard had taken the question thoughtfully. The whack on the head, the night air, and having his arm twisted seemed to have sobered him up, at least temporarily.

"Both, I do believe," he said at last. "One was a lord for sure, whether them in there believe it or not. For I saw his father, and his father bore the guns. Not such poor things such as you wear—beggin your pardon, I know they're the best to be had these days—but *real* guns, such as were seen when my own dad was a boy. The big ones with the sandalwood grips."

Depape had stared at the old man, feeling a rise of excitement . . . and a species of reluctant awe, as well. *They acted like gunslingers*, Jonas had said. When Reynolds protested they were too young, Jonas had said they might be apprentices, and now it seemed the boss had likely been right.

"*Sandal-wood* grips?" he had asked. "*Sandalwood* grips, old dad?"

"Yep." The old man saw his excitement, and his belief. He expanded visibly.

"A gunslinger, you mean. This one young fellow's father carried the big irons."

"Yep, a gunslinger. One of the last lords. Their line is passing, now, but my dad

knew him well enough. Steven Deschain, of Gilead. Steven, son of Henry."

"And this one you saw not long ago—"

"His son. Henry the Tail's grandson. The others looked well-born, as if they might also come from the line of lords, but the one I saw come down all the way from Arthur Eld, by one line or another. Sure as you walk on two legs. Have I earned my metal yet?"

Depape thought to say yes, then realized he didn't know which of the three culls this old bastard was talking about.

"Three young men," he mused. "Three high-borns. And did they have guns?"

"Not out where the drift-diggers of *this* town could see em," the old bastard said, and laughed nastily. "But they had em, all right. Probably hid in their bedrolls. I'd set my watch and warrant on it."

"Aye," Depape said. "I suppose you would. Three young men, one the son of a lord. Of a *gunslinger*, you think. Steven of Gilead." And the name was familiar to him, aye, it was.

"Steven Deschain of Gilead, that's it."

"And what name did he give, this young lord?"

The old bastard had screwed his face up alarmingly in an effort to re-member.

"Deerfield? Deerstine? I don't quite remember—"

"That's all right, I know it. And you've earned your metal."

"Have I?" the old bastard had edged close again, his breath gagging-sweet with the weed. "Gold or silver? Which is it, my friend?"

"Lead," Depape replied, then hauled leather and shot the old man twice in the chest. Doing him a favor, really.

Now he rode back toward Mejis—it would be a faster trip without having to stop in every dipshit little town and ask questions.

There was a flurry of wings close above his head. A pigeon—dark gray, it was, with a white ring around its neck—fluttered down on a rock just ahead of him, as if to rest. An interesting-looking bird. Not, Depape thought, a wild pigeon.

Someone's escaped pet? He couldn't imagine anyone in this desolate quarter of the world keeping anything but a half-wild dog to bite the squash off any would-be robber (although what these folks might have worth robbing was another question he couldn't answer), but he supposed anything was possible. In any case, roast pigeon would go down a treat when he stopped for the night.

Depape drew his gun, but before he could cock the hammer, the pi-geon was off and flying east. Depape took a shot after it, anyway. Some-times you got lucky, but apparently not this time; the pigeon dipped a little, then straightened out and disappeared in the direction Depape him-self was going. He sat astride his horse for a moment, not much put out of countenance; he thought Jonas was going to be very pleased with what he had found out.

After a bit, he booted his horse in the sides and began to canter east along the Barony Sea Road, back toward Mejis, where the boys who had embarrassed him were waiting to be dealt with. Lords they might be, sons of gunslingers they might be, but in these latter days, even such as those could die. As the old bastard himself would undoubtedly have pointed out, the world had moved on.

## 2

On a late afternoon three days after Roy Depape left Ritzy and headed his horse toward Hambry again, Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain rode north and west of town, first down the long swell of the Drop, then into the freeland Hambry folk called the Bad Grass, then into deserty waste lands. Ahead of them and clearly visible once they were back in the open were crum-bled and eroded bluffs. In the center of these was a dark, almost vaginal cleft; its edges so splintered it looked as if it had been whacked into reality by an ill-tempered god wielding a hatchet.

The distance between the end of the Drop and the bluffs was perhaps six miles. Three quarters of the way across, they passed the flatlands' only real geographic feature: a jutting upthrust of rock that looked like a finger bent at the first knuckle. Below it was a small, boomerang-shaped green-sward, and when Cuthbert gave a ululating yell to hear his voice bounce back at him from the bluffs ahead, a pack of chattering billy-bumblers broke from this greenplace and went racing back southeast, toward the Drop.

"That's Hanging Rock," Roland said. "There's a spring at the base of it—only one in these parts, they say."

It was all the talk that passed between them on the ride out, but a look of unmistakable relief passed between Cuthbert and Alain behind Roland's back. For the last three weeks they had pretty much marched in place as summer rolled around them and past them. It was all well for Roland to say they must wait, they

must pay greatest attention to the things that didn't matter and count the things which did from the corners of their eyes, but neither of them quite trusted the dreamy, disconnected air which Roland wore these days like his own special version of Clay Reynolds's cloak. They didn't talk about this between themselves; they didn't have to. Both knew that if Roland began courting the pretty girl whom Mayor Thorin meant for his gilly (and who else could that long blonde hair have belonged to?), they would be in very bad trouble. But Roland showed no courting plumage, neither of them spied any more blonde hairs on his shirt-collars, and tonight he seemed more himself, as if he had put that cloak of abstraction aside. Temporarily, mayhap. Permanently, if they were lucky. They could only wait and see. In the end, *ka* would tell, as it always did.

A mile or so from the bluffs, the strong sea breeze which had been at their backs for the whole ride suddenly dropped, and they heard the low, atonal squalling from the cleft that was Eyebolt Canyon. Alain pulled up, grimacing like a man who has bitten into a fruit of extravagant sourness. All he could think of was a handful of sharp pebbles, squeezed and ground together in a strong hand. Buzzards circled above the canyon as if drawn to the sound.

"The lookout don't like it. Will." Cuthbert said, knocking his knuckles on the skull. "I don't like it much, either. What are we out here for?"

"To count," Roland said. "We were sent to count everything and see everything, and this is something to count and see."

"Oh, aye," Cuthbert said. He held his horse in with some effort; the low, grinding wail of the thinny had made it skittish. "Sixteen hundred and fourteen fishing nets, seven hundred and ten boats small, two hundred and fourteen boats large, seventy oxen that nobody will admit to, and, on the north of town, one thinny. Whatever the hell *that* is."

"We're going to find out," Roland said.

They rode into the sound, and although none of them liked it, no one suggested they go back. They had come all the way out here, and Roland was right—this was their job. Besides, they were curious.

The mouth of the canyon had been pretty well stopped up with brush, as Susan had told Roland it would be. Come fall, most of it would probably be dead, but now the stacked branches still bore leaves and made it hard to see into the canyon. A path led through the center of the brush-pile, but it was narrow for the horses

(who might have balked at going through, anyway), and in the failing light Roland could make out hardly anything.

"Are we going in?" Cuthbert asked. "Let the Recording Angel note that I'm against, although I'll offer no mutiny."

Roland had no intention of taking them through the brush and toward the source of that sound. Not when he had only the vaguest idea of what a thinny was. He had asked a few questions about it over the last few weeks, and gotten little useful response. "I'd stay away," was the extent of Sheriff Avery's advice. So far his best information was still what he had gotten from Susan on the night he met her.

"Sit easy, Bert. We're not going in."

"Good," Alain said softly, and Roland smiled.

There was a path up the canyon's west side, steep and narrow, but passable if they were careful. They went single file, stopping once to clear a rockfall, pitching splintered chunks of shale and hornfels into the groan-ing trench to their right. When this was done and just as the three of them were preparing to mount up again, a large bird of some sort—perhaps a grouse, perhaps a prairie chicken—rose above the lip of the canyon in an explosive whir of feathers. Roland dipped for his guns, and saw both Cuthbert and Alain doing the same. Quite funny, considering that their firearms were wrapped in protective oilcloth and secreted beneath the floorboards of the Bar K bunkhouse.

They looked at each other, said nothing (except with their eyes, which said plenty), and went on. Roland found that the effect of being this close to the thinny was cumulative—it wasn't a sound you could get used to. Quite the contrary, in fact: the longer you were in the immediate vicinity of Eye-bolt Canyon, the more that sound scraped away at your brain. It got into your teeth as well as your ears; it vibrated in the knot of nerves below the breastbone and seemed to eat at the damp and delicate tissue behind the eyes. Most of all, though, it got into your head, telling you that everything you had ever been afraid of was just behind the next curve of the trail or yonder pile of tumbled rock, waiting to snake out of its place and get you.

Once they got to the flat and barren ground at the top of the path and the sky opened out above them again it was a little better, but by then the light was almost gone, and when they dismounted and walked to the canyon's crumbling edge, they could see little but shadows.

"No good," Cuthbert said disgustedly. "We should have left earlier, Roland . . . Will, I mean. What dummies we are!"

"I can be Roland to you out here, if you like. And we'll see what we came to see and count what we came to count—one thinny, just as you said. Only wait."

They waited, and not twenty minutes later the Peddler's Moon rose above the horizon—a perfect summer moon, huge and orange. It loomed in the darkening violet swim of the sky like a crashing planet. On its face, as clear as anyone had ever seen it, was the Peddler, he who came out of Nones with his sackful of squealing souls. A hunched figure made of smudged shadows with a pack clearly visible over one cringing shoulder. Behind it, the orange light seemed to flame like hellfire.

"Ugh," Cuthbert said. "That's an ill sight to see with that sound coming up from below."

Yet they held their ground (and their horses, which periodically yanked back on their reins as if to tell them they should already be gone from this place), and the moon rose in the sky, shrinking a little as it went and turning silver. Eventually it rose enough to cast its bony light into Eyebolt Canyon. The three boys stood looking down. None of them spoke. Roland didn't know about his friends, but he didn't think he himself could have spoken even if called on to do so.

*A box canyon, very short and steep-sided*, Susan had said, and the description was perfectly accurate. She'd also said Eyebolt looked like a chimney lying on its side, and Roland supposed that was also true, if you allowed that a falling chimney might break up a little on impact, and lie with one crooked place in its middle.

Up to that crook, the canyon floor looked ordinary enough; even the litter of bones the moon showed them was not extraordinary. Many animals which wandered into box canyons hadn't the wit to find their way back out again, and with Eyebolt the possibility of escape was further reduced by the choke of brush piled at the canyon's mouth. The sides were much too steep to climb except maybe for one place, just before that crooked little jog. There Roland saw a kind of groove running up the canyon wall, with enough jutting spurs inside it to—maybe!—provide handholds. There was no real reason for him to note this; he just did, as he would go on noting potential escape-routes his entire life.

Beyond the jag in the canyon floor was something none of them had ever seen before ... and when they got back to the bunkhouse several hours later, they all

agreed that they weren't sure exactly what they *had* seen. The latter part of Eyebolt Canyon was obscured by a sullen, silvery liquescence from which snakes of smoke or mist were rising in streamers. The liquid seemed to move sluggishly, lapping at the walls which held it in. Later, they would discover that both liquid and mist were a light green; it was only the moonlight that had made them look silver.

As they watched, a dark flying shape—perhaps it was the same one that had frightened them before—skimmed down toward the surface of the thinny. It snatched something out of the air—a bug? another, smaller, bird?—and then began to rise again. Before it could, a silvery arm of liquid rose from the canyon's floor. For a moment that soupy, grinding grumble rose a notch, and became almost a voice. It snatched the bird out of the air and dragged it down. Greenish light, brief and unfocused, flashed across the surface of the thinny like electricity, and was gone.

The three boys stared at each other with frightened eyes.

*Jump in, gunslinger,* a voice suddenly called. It was the voice of the thinny; it was the voice of his father; it was also the voice of Marten the enchanter, Marten the seducer. Most terrible of all, it was his own voice.

*Jump in and let all these cares cease. There is no love of girls to worry you here, and no mourning of lost mothers to weigh your child's heart. Only the hum of the growing cavity at the center of the universe; only the punky sweetness of rotting flesh.*

*Come, gunslinger. Be apart of the thinny.*

Dreamy-faced and blank-eyed, Alain began walking along the edge of the drop, his right boot so close to it that the heel puffed little clouds of dust over the chasm and sent clusters of pebbles down into it. Before he could get more than five steps, Roland grabbed him by the belt and yanked him roughly back.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Alain looked at him with sleepwalker's eyes. They began to clear, but slowly. "I don't . . . know, Roland."

Below them, the thinny hummed and growled and sang. There was a sound, as well: an oozing, sludgy mutter.

"I know," Cuthbert said. "I know where we're all going. Back to the Bar K. Come on, let's get out of here." He looked pleadingly at Roland. "Please. It's awful."



"All right."

But before he led them back to the path, he stepped to the edge and looked down at the smoky silver ooze below him. "Counting," he said with a kind of clear defiance. "Counting one thinny." Then, lowering his voice: "And be damned to you."

### 3

Their composure returned as they rode back—the sea-breeze in their faces was wonderfully restorative after the dead and somehow *baked* smell of the canyon and the thinny.

As they rode up the Drop (on a long diagonal, so as to save the horses a little), Alain said: "What do we do next, Roland? Do you know?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I don't."

"Supper would be a start," Cuthbert said brightly, and tapped the lookout's hollow skull for emphasis.

"You know what I mean."

"Yes," Cuthbert agreed. "And I'll tell you something, Roland—"

"Will, please. Now that we're back on the Drop, let me be Will."

"Aye, fine. I'll tell you something, Will: we can't go on counting nets and boats and looms and wheel-irons much longer. We're running out of things that don't matter. I believe that looking stupid will become a good deal harder once we move to the horse-breeding side of life as it's lived in Hambry."

"Aye," Roland said. He stopped Rusher and looked back the way they had come. He was momentarily enchanted by the sight of horses, appar-ently infected with a kind of moon-madness, frolicking and racing across the silvery grass. "But I tell you both again, *this is not just about horses*. Does Farson need them? Aye, mayhap. So does the Affiliation. Oxen as well. But there are horses everywhere—perhaps not as good as these, I'll admit, but any port does in a storm, so they say. So, if it's not horses, what is it? Until we know, or decide we'll *never* know, we go on as we are."

Part of the answer was waiting for them back at the Bar K. It was perched on the hitching rail and flicking its tail saucily. When the pigeon hopped into Roland's hand, he saw that one of its wings was oddly frayed. Some animal—likely a

cat—had crept up on it close enough to pounce, he reckoned.

The note curled against the pigeon's leg was short, but it explained a good deal of what they hadn't understood.

*I'll have to see her again*, Roland thought after reading it, and felt a surge of gladness. His pulse quickened, and in the cold silver light of the Peddler's Moon, he smiled.

## CHAPTER IX

### citgo

#### 1

The Peddler's Moon began to wane; it would take the hottest, fairest part of the summer with it when it went. On an afternoon four days past the full, the old *mozo* from Mayor's House (Miguel had been there long before Hart Thorin's time and would likely be there long after Thorin had gone back to his ranch) showed up at the house Susan shared with her aunt. He was leading a beautiful chestnut mare by a hack'. It was the second of the three promised horses, and Susan recognized Felicia at once. The mare had been one other childhood's favorites.

Susan embraced Miguel and covered his bearded cheeks with kisses. The old man's wide grin would have showed every tooth in his head, if he'd had any left to show. "*Gracias, gracias*, a thousand thanks, old father," she told him.

"*Da nada*," he replied, and handed her the bridle. "It is the Mayor's earnest gift." She watched him away, the smile slowly fading from her lips. Felicia stood docilely beside her, her dark brown coat shining like a dream in the summer sunlight. But this was no dream. It had seemed like one at first— that sense of

unreality had been another inducement to walk into the trap, she now understood—but it was no dream. She had been proved honest; now she found herself the recipient of "earnest gifts" from a rich man. The phrase was a sop to conventionality, of course ... or a bitter joke, depending on one's mood and outlook. Felicia was no more a gift than Pylon had been—they were step-by-step fulfillments of the contract into which she had entered. Aunt Cord could express shock, but Susan knew the truth: what lay directly ahead was whoring, pure and simple.

Aunt Cord was in the kitchen window as Susan walked her gift (which was really just returned property, in her view) to the stable. She called out something passing cheery about how the horse was a good thing, that caring for it would give Susan less time for her megrims. Susan felt a hot reply rise to her lips and held it back. There had been a wary truce between the two of them since the shouting match about the shirts, and Susan didn't want to be the one to break it. There was too much on her mind and heart. She thought that one more argument with her aunt and she might simply snap like a dry twig under a boot. *Because often silence is best*, her father had told her when, at age ten or so, she had asked him why he was always so quiet. The answer had puzzled her then, but now she understood better. She stabled Felicia next to Pylon, rubbed her down, fed her. While the mare munched oats, Susan examined her hooves. She didn't care much for the look of the iron the mare was wearing—that was Seafront for you—and so she took her father's shoebag from its nail beside the stable door, slung the strap over her head and shoulder so the bag hung on her hip, and walked the two miles to Hockey's Stable and Fancy Livery. Feeling the leather bag bang against her hip brought back her father in a way so fresh and clear that grief pricked her again and made her feel like crying. She thought he would have been appalled at her current situation, perhaps even disgusted. And he would have liked Will Dearborn, of that she was sure—liked him and approved of him for her. It was the final miserable touch.

## 2

She had known how to shoe most of her life, and even enjoyed it, when her mood was right; it was dusty, elemental work, with always the possibility of a healthy

kick in the slats to relieve the boredom and bring a girl back to reality. But of *making* shoes she knew nothing, nor wished to. Brian Hookey made them at the forge behind his barn and hostelry, how-ever; Susan easily picked out four new ones of the right size, enjoying the smell of horseflesh and fresh hay as she did. Fresh paint, too. Hockey's Stable & Smithy looked very well, indeed. Glancing up, she saw not so much as a single hole in the barn roof. Times had been good for Hookey, it seemed.

He wrote the new shoes up on a beam, still wearing his blacksmith's apron and squinting horribly out of one eye at his own figures. When Susan began to speak haltingly to him about payment, he laughed, told her he knew she'd settle her accounts as soon as she could, gods bless her, yes. 'Sides, they weren't any of them going anywhere, were they? Nawp, nawp. All the time gently propelling her through the fragrant smells of hay and horses toward the door. He would not have treated even so small a matter as four iron shoes in such a carefree manner a year ago, but now she was Mayor Thorin's good friend, and things had changed. The afternoon sunlight was dazzling after the dimness of Hockey's barn, and she was momentarily blinded, groping forward toward the street with the leather bag bouncing on her hip and the shoes clashing softly in-side. She had just a moment to register a shape looming in the brightness, and then it thumped into her hard enough to rattle her teeth and make Felicia's new shoes clang. She would have fallen, but for strong hands that quickly reached out and grasped her shoulders. By then her eyes were adjusting and she saw with dismay and amusement that the young man who had almost knocked her sprawling into the dirt was one of Will's friends— Richard Stockworth.

"Oh, sai, your pardon!" he said, brushing the arms of her dress as if he *had* knocked her over. "Are you well? Are you quite well?"

"Quite well," she said, smiling. "Please don't apologize." She felt a sudden wild impulse to stand on tiptoe and kiss his mouth and say, *Give that to Will and tell him to never mind what I said! Tell him there are a thousand more where that came from! Tell him to come and get every one!*

Instead, she fixed on a comic image: this Richard Stockworth smack-ing Will full on the mouth and saying it was from Susan Delgado. She began to giggle. She put her hands to her mouth, but it did no good. Sai Stockworth smiled back at her . . . tentatively, cautiously. *He probably thinks I'm mad . . . and I am! I am!*

"Good day, Mr. Stockworth," she said, and passed on before she could embarrass herself further.

"Good day, Susan Delgado," he called in return.

She looked back once, when she was fifty yards or so farther up the street, but he was already gone. Not into Hockey's, though; of that she was quite sure. She wondered what Mr. Stockworth had been doing at that end of town to begin with. Half an hour later, as she took the new iron from her da's shoebag, she found out. There was a folded scrap of paper tucked between two of the shoes, and even before she unfolded it, she understood that her collision with Mr. Stockworth hadn't been an accident.

She recognized Will's handwriting at once from the note in the bouquet.

Susan,

Can you meet me at Citgo this evening or tomorrow evening? Very important. Has to do with what we discussed before. Please.

W.

P.S. Best you bum this note.

She burned it at once, and as she watched the flames first flash up and then die down, she murmured over and over the one word in it which had struck her the hardest: *Please*.

### 3

She and Aunt Cord ate a simple, silent evening meal—bread and soup—and when it was done, Susan rode Felicia out to the Drop and watched the sun go down. She would not be meeting him this evening, no. She already owed too much sorrow to impulsive, unthinking behavior. But tomorrow?

*Why Citgo?*

*Has to do with what we discussed before.*

Yes, probably. She did not doubt his honor, although she had much come to wonder if he and his friends were who they said they were. He probably did want to see her for some reason which bore on his mission (although how the oilpatch

could have anything to do with too many horses on the Drop she did not know), but there was something between them now, something sweet and dangerous. They might start off talking but would likely end up kissing ... and kissing would just be the start. Knowing didn't change feeling, though; she wanted to see him. *Needed to see him.*

So she sat astride her new horse—another of Hart Thorin's payments-in-advance on her virginity—and watched the sun swell and turn red in the west. She listened to the faint grumble of the thinny, and for the first time in her sixteen years was truly torn by indecision. All she wanted stood against all she believed of honor, and her mind roared with conflict. Around all, like a rising wind around an unstable house, she felt the idea of *ka* growing. Yet to give over one's honor for that reason was so easy, wasn't it? To excuse the fall of virtue by invoking all-powerful *ka*. It was soft thinking.

Susan felt as blind as she'd been when leaving the darkness of Brian Hockey's bam for the brightness of the street. At one point she cried silently in frustration without even being aware of it, and pervading her every effort to think clearly and rationally was her desire to kiss him again, and to feel his hand cupping her breast. She had never been a religious girl, had little faith in the dim gods of Mid-World, so at the last of it, with the sun gone and the sky above its point of exit going from red to purple, she tried to pray to her father. And an answer came, although whether from him or from her own heart she didn't know.

*Let ka mind itself, the voice in her mind said. It will, anyway; it al-ways does. If ka. should overrule your honor, so it will be; in the mean-time, Susan, there's no one to mind it but yourself. Let ka go and mind the virtue of your promise, hard as that may be.*

"All right," she said. In her current state she discovered that any deci-sion—even one that would cost her another chance to see Will—was a re-lief. "I'll honor my promise. *Ka* can take care of itself."

In the gathering shadows, she clucked sidemouth to Felicia and turned for home.

The next day was Sanday, the traditional cowboys' day of rest. Roland's little band took this day off as well. "It's fair enough that we should," Cuthbert said, "since

we don't know what the hell we're doing in the first place."

On this particular Sanday—their sixth since coming to Hambry— Cuthbert was in the upper market (lower market was cheaper, by and large, but too fishy-smelling for his liking), looking at brightly colored *scrapes* and trying not to cry. For his mother had a *serape*, it was a great favorite others, and thinking of how she would ride out sometimes with it flowing back from her shoulders had filled him with homesickness so strong it was savage. "Arthur Heath," Roland's *ka-mai*, missing his mama so badly his eyes were wet! It was a joke worthy of... well, worthy of Cuthbert Allgood.

As he stood so, looking at the *serapes* and a hanging rack of *dolina* blankets with his hands clasped behind his back like a patron in an art gallery (and blinking back tears all the while), there came a light tap on his shoulder. He turned, and there was the girl with the blonde hair.

Cuthbert wasn't surprised that Roland was smitten with her. She was nothing short of breathtaking, even dressed in jeans and a farmshirt. Her hair was tied back with a series of rough rawhide hanks, and she had eyes of the brightest gray Cuthbert had ever seen. Cuthbert thought it was a wonder that Roland had been able to continue with any other aspect of his life at all, even down to the washing of his teeth. Certainly she came with a cure for Cuthbert; sentimental thoughts of his mother disappeared in an instant.

"Sai," he said. It was all he could manage, at least to start with.

She nodded and held out what the folk of Mejis called a *corvette*— "little packet" was the literal definition; "little purse" was the practical one. These small leather accessories, big enough for a few coins but not much more, were more often carried by ladies than gentlemen, although that was not a hard-and-fast rule of fashion.

"Ye dropped this, cully," she said.

"Nay, thankee-sai." This one well might have been the property of a man—plain black leather, and unadorned by foofraws—but he had never seen it before. Never carried a *corvette*, for that matter.

"It's yours," she said, and her eyes were now so intense that her gaze felt hot on his skin. He should have understood at once, but he had been blinded by her unexpected appearance. Also, he admitted, by her clever-ness. You somehow didn't expect cleverness from a girl this beautiful; beautiful girls did not, as a rule,

have to be clever. So far as Bert could tell, all beautiful girls had to do was wake up in the morning. "It *is*."

"Oh, aye," he said, almost snatching the little purse from her. He could feel a foolish grin overspreading his face. "Now that you mention it, sai—"

"Susan." Her eyes were grave and watchful above her smile. "Let me be Susan to you, I pray."

"With pleasure. I cry your pardon, Susan, it's just that my mind and memory, realizing it's Sanday, have joined hands and gone off on holiday together—eloped, you might say—and left me temporarily without a brain in my head."

He might well have rattled on like that for another hour (he had before; to that both Roland and Alain could testify), but she stopped him with the easy briskness of an older sister. "I can easily believe ye have no control over yer mind, Mr. Heath—or the tongue hung below it- but perhaps ye'll take better care of yer purse in the future. Good day." She was gone before he could get another word out.

## 5

Bert found Roland where he so often was these days: out on the part of the Drop that was called Town Lookout by many of the locals. It gave a fair view of Hambry, dreaming away its Sanday afternoon in a blue haze, but Cuthbert rather doubted the Hambry view was what drew his oldest friend back here time after time. He thought that its view of the Delgado house was the more likely reason. This day Roland was with Alain, neither of them saying a word. Cuthbert had no trouble *accepting* the idea that some people could go long periods of time without talking to each other, but he did not think he would ever *understand* it.

He came riding up to them at a gallop, reached inside his shirt, and pulled out the *corvette*. "From Susan Delgado. She gave it to me in the upper market. She's beautiful, and she's also as wily as a snake. I say that with utmost admiration." Roland's face filled with light and life. When Cuthbert tossed him the *corvette*, he caught it one-handed and pulled the lace-tie with his teeth. Inside, where a travelling man would have kept his few scraps of money, there was a single folded piece of paper. Roland read this quickly, the light going out of his eyes, the smile fading off his mouth.



"What does it say?" Alain asked.

Roland handed it to him and then went back to looking out at the Drop. It wasn't until he saw the very real desolation in his friend's eyes that Cuthbert fully realized how far into Roland's life—and hence into all their lives—Susan Delgado had come.

Alain handed him the note. It was only a single line, two sentences:

*It's best we don't meet. I'm sorry.*

Cuthbert read it twice, as if rereading might change it, then handed it back to Roland. Roland put the note back into the *corvette*, tied the lace, and then tucked the little purse into his own shirt.

Cuthbert hated silence worse than danger (it *was* danger, to his mind), but every conversational opening he tried in his mind seemed callow and unfeeling, given the look on his friend's face. It was as if Roland had been poisoned. Cuthbert was disgusted at the thought of that lovely young girl bumping hips with the long and bony Mayor of Hambry, but the look on Roland's face now called up stronger emotions. For that he could hate her.

At last Alain spoke up, almost timidly. "And now, Roland? Shall we have a hunt out there at the oilpatch without her?"

Cuthbert admired that. Upon first meeting him, many people dismissed Alain Johns as something of a dullard. That was very far from the truth. Now, in a diplomatic way Cuthbert could never have matched, he had pointed out that Roland's unhappy first experience with love did not change their responsibilities. And Roland responded, raising himself off the saddle-horn and sitting up straight. The strong golden light of that summer's afternoon lit his face in harsh contrasts, and for a moment that face was haunted by the ghost of the man he would become. Cuthbert saw that ghost and shivered—not knowing what he saw, only knowing that it was awful.

"The Big Coffin Hunters," he said. "Did you see them in town?"

"Jonas and Reynolds," Cuthbert answered. "Still no sign of Depape. I think Jonas must have choked him and thrown him over the sea cliffs in a fit of pique after that night in the bar."

Roland shook his head. "Jonas needs the men he trusts too much to waste them—he's as far out on thin ice as we are. No, Depape's just been sent off for awhile."

"Sent where?" Alain asked.

"Where he'll have to shit in the bushes and sleep in the rain if the weather's bad." Roland laughed shortly, without much humor. "Jonas has got Depape running our backtrail, more likely than not."

Alain grunted softly, in surprise that wasn't really surprise. Roland sat easily astride Rusher, looking out over the dreamy depths of land, at the grazing horses. With one hand he unconsciously rubbed the *corvette* he had tucked into his shirt. At last he looked around at them again.

"We'll wait a bit longer," he said. "Perhaps she'll change her mind."

"Roland—" Alain began, and his tone was deadly in its gentleness.

Roland raised his hands before Alain could go on. "Doubt me not, Alain—I speak as my father's son."

"All right." Alain reached out and briefly gripped Roland's shoulder. As for Cuthbert, he reserved judgment. Roland might or might not be acting as his father's son; Cuthbert guessed that at this point Roland hardly knew his own mind at all.

"Do you remember what Cort used to say was the primary weakness of maggots such as us?" Roland asked with a trace of a smile.

" 'You run without consideration and fall in a hole,' " Alain quoted in a gruff imitation that made Cuthbert laugh aloud.

Roland's smile broadened a touch. "Aye. They're words I mean to re-member, boys. I'll not upset this cart in order to see what's in it ... not unless there's no other choice. Susan may come around yet, given time to think. I believe she would have agreed to meet me already, if not for ... other matters between us."

He paused, and for a little while there was quiet among them.

"I wish our fathers hadn't sent us," Alain said at last... although it was *Roland's* father who had sent them, and all three knew it. "We're too young for matters such as these. Too young by years."

"We did all right that night in the Rest," Cuthbert said.

"That was training, not guile—and they didn't take us seriously. That won't happen again."

"They wouldn't have sent us—not my father, not yours—if they'd known what we'd find," Roland said. "But now we've found it, and now we're for it. Yes?"

Alain and Cuthbert nodded. They were for it, all right—there no longer seemed

any doubt of that.

"In any case, it's too late to worry about it now. We'll wait and hope for Susan. I'd rather not go near Citgo without someone from Hambry who knows the lay of the place ... but if Depape comes back, we'll have to take our chance. God knows what he may find out, or what stories he may invent to please Jonas, or what Jonas may do after they palaver. There may be shooting."

"After all this creeping around, I'd almost welcome it," Cuthbert said.

"Will you send her another note, Will Dearborn?" Alain asked.

Roland thought about it. Cuthbert laid an interior bet with himself on which way Roland would go. And lost.

"No," he said at last. "We'll have to give her time, hard as that is. And hope her curiosity will bring her around."

With that he turned Rusher toward the abandoned bunkhouse which now served them as home. Cuthbert and Alain followed.

## 6

Susan, worked herself hard the rest of that Sanday, mucking out the sta-bles, carrying water, washing down all the steps. Aunt Cord watched all this in silence, her expression one of mingled doubt and amazement. Su-san cared not a bit for how her aunt looked—she wanted only to exhaust herself and avoid another sleepless night. It was over. Will would know it as well now, and that was to the good. Let done be done.

"Are ye daft, girl?" was all Aunt Cord asked her as Susan dumped her last pail of dirty rinse-water behind the kitchen. "It's Sanday!"

"Not daft a bit," she replied shortly, without looking around.

She accomplished the first half of her aim, going to bed just after moonrise with tired arms, aching legs, and a throbbing back—but sleep still did not come. She lay in bed wide-eyed and unhappy. The hours passed, the moon set, and still Susan couldn't sleep. She looked into the dark and wondered if there was any possibility, even the slightest, that her father had been murdered. To stop his mouth, to close his eyes.

Finally she reached the conclusion Roland had already come to: if there had been no attraction for her in those eyes of his, or the touch of his hands and lips, she

would have agreed in a flash to the meeting he wanted. If only to set her troubled mind to rest.

At this realization, relief overspread her and she was able to sleep.

## 7

Late the next afternoon, while Roland and his friends were at fives in the Travellers' Rest (cold beef sandwiches and gallons of white iced tea—not as good as that made by Deputy Dave's wife, but not bad), Sheemie came in from outside, where he had been watering his flowers. He was wearing his pink *sombrero* and a wide grin. In one hand he held a little packet.

"Hello, there, you Little Coffin Hunters!" he cried cheerfully, and made a bow which was an amusingly good imitation of their own. Cuthbert particularly enjoyed seeing such a bow done in gardening sandals. "How be you? Well, I'm hoping, so I do!"

"Right as rainbarrels," Cuthbert said, "but none of us enjoys being called Little Coffin Hunters, so maybe you could just play soft on that, all right?"

"Aye," Sheemie said, as cheerful as ever. "Aye, Mr. Arthur Heath, good fella who saved my life!" He paused and looked puzzled for a moment, as if unable to remember why he had approached them in the first place. Then his eyes cleared, his grin shone out, and he held the packet out to Roland. "For you, Will Dearborn!"

"Really? What is it?"

"Seeds! So they are!"

"From you, Sheemie?"

"Oh, no."

Roland took the packet—just an envelope which had been folded over and sealed. There was nothing written on the front or back, and the tips of his fingers felt no seeds within.

"Who from, then?"

"Can't remember," said Sheemie, who then cast his eyes aside. His brains had been stirred just enough, Roland reflected, so that he would never be unhappy for long, and would never be able to lie at all. Then his eyes, hopeful and timid, came back to Roland's. "I remember what I was supposed to say to you, though."

"Aye? Then say it, Sheemie."

Speaking as one who recites a painfully memorized line, both proud and nervous, he said: "These are the seeds you scattered on the Drop."

Roland's eyes blazed so fiercely that Sheemie stumbled back a step. He gave his *sombrero* a quick tug, turned, and hurried back to the safety of his flowers. He liked Will Dearborn and Will's friends (especially Mr. Arthur Heath, who sometimes said things that made Sheemie laugh fit to split), but in that moment he saw something in Will-sai's eyes that fright-ened him badly. In that instant he understood that Will was as much a killer as the one in the cloak, or the one who had wanted Sheemie to lick his boots clean, or old white-haired Jonas with the trembly voice.

As bad as them, or even worse.

## 8

Roland slipped the "seed-packet" into his shirt and didn't open it until the three of them were back on the porch of the Bar K. In the distance, the thinny grumbled, making their horses twitch their ears nervously.

"Well?" Cuthbert asked at last, unable to restrain himself any longer. Roland took the envelope from inside his shirt, and tore it open. As he did, he reflected that Susan had known exactly what to say. To a nicety.

The others bent in, Alain (mm his left and Cuthbert from his right, as he unfolded the single scrap of paper. Again he saw her simple, neatly made writing, the message not much longer than the previous one. Very different in content, however.

There is an orange grove a mile off the road on the town side of Citgo. Meet me there at moonrise. Come alone. S.

And below that, printed in emphatic little letters: burn this.

"We'll keep a lookout," Alain said.

Roland nodded. "Aye. But from a distance."

Then he burned the note.

The orange grove was a neatly kept rectangle of about a dozen rows at the end of a partly overgrown cart-track. Roland arrived there after dark but still a good half hour before the rapidly thinning Peddler would haul him-self over the horizon once more.

As the boy wandered along one of the rows, listening to the somehow skeletal sounds from the oilpatch to the north (squealing pistons, grinding gears, thudding driveshafts), he was struck by deep homesickness. It was the fragile fragrance of orange-blossoms—a bright runner laid over the darker stench of oil—that brought it on. This toy grove was nothing like the great apple orchards of New Canaan . . . except somehow it was. There was the same feeling of dignity and civilization here, of much time devoted to something not strictly necessary. And in this case, he suspected, not very useful, either. Oranges grown this far north of the warm latitudes were probably almost as sour as lemons. Still, when the breeze stirred the trees, the smell made him think of Gilead with bitter longing, and for the first time he considered the possibility that he might never see home again—that he had become as much a wanderer as old Peddler Moon in the sky.

He heard her, but not until she was almost on top of him—if she'd been an enemy instead of a friend, he might still have had time to draw and fire, but it would have been close. He was filled with admiration, and as he saw her face in the starlight, he felt his heart gladden.

She halted when he turned and merely looked at him, her hands linked before her at her waist in a way that was sweetly and unconsciously childlike. He took a step toward her and they came up in what he took for alarm. He stopped, confused. But he had misread her gesture in the chancy light. She could have stopped then, but chose not to. She stepped toward him deliberately, a tall young woman in a split riding skirt and plain black boots. Her *sombrero* hung down on her back, against the bound rope of her hair.

"Will Dearborn, we are met both fair and ill," she said in a trembling voice, and then he was kissing her; they burned against one another as the Peddler rose in the famine of its last quarter.

Inside her lonely hut high on the Coos, Rhea sat at her kitchen table, bent over the glass the Big Coffin Hunters had brought her a month and a half ago. Her face was bathed in its pink glow, and no one would have mis-taken it for the face of a girl any longer. She had extraordinary vitality, and it had carried her for many years (only the longest-lived residents of Hambry had any idea of how old Rhea of the Coos actually was, and they only the vaguest), but the glass was finally sapping it—sucking it out of her as a vampire sucks blood. Behind her, the hut's larger room was even dingier and more cluttered than usual. These days she had no time for even a pretense of cleaning; the glass ball took up all her time. When she wasn't looking into it, she was *thinking* of looking into it ... and, oh! Such things she had seen!

Ermot twined around one of her scrawny legs, hissing with agitation, but she barely noticed him. Instead she bent even closer into the ball's poison pink glow, enchanted by what she saw there.

It was the girl who had come to her to be proved honest, and the young man she had seen the first time she'd looked into the ball. The one she had mistaken for a gunslinger, until she had realized his youth.

The foolish girl, who had come to Rhea singing and left in a more proper silence, had proved honest, and might well be honest yet (certainly she kissed and touched the boy with a virgin's mingled greed and ti-midity), but she wouldn't be honest much longer if they kept on the way they were going. And wouldn't Hart Thorin be in for a surprise when he took his supposedly pure young gilly to bed? There were ways to fool men about that (men practically *begged* to be fooled about that), a thimble of pig's blood would serve nicely, but *she* wouldn't know that. Oh, this was too good! And to think she could watch Miss Haughty brought low, right here, in this wonderful glass! Oh, it was too good! Too wonderful!

She leaned closer still, the deep sockets of her eyes filling with pink fire. Ermot, sensing that she remained immune to his blandishments, crawled disconsolately away across the floor, in search of bugs. Musty pranced away from him, spitting feline curses, his six-legged shadow huge and misshapen on the firestruck wall.

Roland sensed the moment rushing at them. Somehow he managed to step away from her, and she stepped back from him, her eyes wide and her cheeks flushed—he could see that flush even in the light of the newly risen moon. His balls were throbbing. His groin felt full of liquid lead.

She half-turned away from him, and Roland saw that her *sombrero* had gone askew on her back. He reached out one trembling hand and straightened it. She clasped his fingers in a brief but strong grip, then bent to pick up her riding gloves, which she had stripped off in her need to touch him skin to skin. When she stood again, the wash of blood abruptly left her face, and she reeled. But for his hands on her shoulders, steadying her, she might have fallen. She turned toward him, eyes rueful.

"What are we to do? Oh, Will, what are we to do?"

"The best we can," he said. "As we both always have. As our fathers taught us."

"This is mad."

Roland, who had never felt anything so sane in his life—even the deep ache in his groin felt sane and right—said nothing.

"Do ye know how dangerous 'tis?" she asked, and went on before he could reply.

"Aye, ye do. I can see ye do. If we were seen together at all, 'twould be serious. To be seen as we just were—"

She shivered. He reached for her and she stepped back. "Best ye don't, Will. If ye do, won't be nothing done between us but spooning. Un-less that was your intention?"

"You know it wasn't."

She nodded. "Have ye set your friends to watch?"

"Aye," he said, and then his face opened in that unexpected smile she loved so well. "But not where they can watch *us*."

"Thank the gods for that," she said, and laughed rather distractedly. Then she stepped closer to him, so close that he was hard put not to take her in his arms again. She looked curiously up into his face. "Who are you, really. Will?"

"Almost who I say I am. That's the joke of this, Susan. My friends and I weren't sent here because we were drunk and belling, but we weren't sent here to uncover any fell plot or secret conspiracy, either. We were just boys to be put out of the way in a time of danger. All that's hap-pened since—" He shook his head to show how helpless he felt, and Su-san thought again of her father saying *ka* was like a



wind—when it came it might take your chickens, your house, your bam. Even your life.

"And is Will Dearborn your real name?"

He shrugged. "One name's as good as another, I wot, if the heart that answers to it is true. Susan, you were at Mayor's House today, for my friend Richard saw you ride up—"

"Aye, fittings," she said. "For I am to be this year's Reaping Girl— it's Hart's choice, nothing I ever would have had on my own, mark I say it. A lot of foolishness, and hard on Olive as well, I warrant."

"You will make the most beautiful Reap-Girl that ever was," he said, and the clear sincerity in his voice made her tingle with pleasure; her cheeks grew warm again. There were five changes of costume for the Reaping Girl between the noon feast and the bonfire at dusk, each more elaborate than the last (in Gilead there would have been nine; in that way, Susan didn't know how lucky she was), and she would have worn all five happily for Will, had he been the Reaping Lad. (This year's Lad was Jamie McCann, a pallid and whey-faced stand-in for Hart Thorin, who was approximately forty years too old and gray for the job.) Even more happily would she have worn the sixth—a silvery shift with wisp-thin straps and a hem that stopped high on her thighs. This was a costume no one but Maria, her maid, Conchetta, her seamstress, and Hart Thorin would ever see. It was the one she would be wearing when she went to the old man's couch as his gilly, after the feast was over.

"When you were up there, did you see the ones who call themselves the Big Coffin Hunters?"

"I saw Jonas and the one with the cloak, standing together in the courtyard and talking," she said. "Not Depape? The redhead?" She shook her head.

"Do you know the game Castles. Susan?"

"Aye. My father showed me when I was small."

"Then you know how the red pieces stand at one end of the board and the white at the other. How they come around the Hillocks and creep toward each other, setting screens for cover. What's going on here in Ham-Dry is very like that. And, as in the game, it has now become a question of who will break cover first. Do you understand?"

She nodded at once. "In the game, the first one around his Hillock is vulnerable."

"In life, too. Always. But sometimes even staying in cover is difficult. My friends and I have counted nearly everything we dare count. To count the rest—"

"The horses on the Drop, for instance."

"Aye, just so. To count them would be to break cover. Or the oxen we know about—"

Her eyebrows shot up. "There are no oxen in Hambry. Ye must be mistaken about that."

"No mistake."

"Where?"

"The Rocking H."

Now her eyebrows drew back down, and knitted in a thoughtful frown. "That's Laslo Rimer's place."

"Aye—Kimba's brother. Nor are those the only treasures hidden away in Hambry these days. There are extra wagons, extra tack hidden in barns belonging to members of the Horsemen's Association, extra caches of feed—"

"Will, *no!*"

"Yes. All that and more. But to count them—to be *seen* counting them—is to break cover. To risk being Castled. Our recent days have been pretty nightmarish—we try to look profitably busy without moving over to the Drop side of Hambry, where most of the danger lies. It's harder and harder to do. Then we received a message—"

"A message? How? From whom?"

"Best you not know those things, I think. But it's led us to believe that some of the answers we're looking for may be at Citgo."

"Will, d'ye think that what's out here may help me to know more about what happened to my da?"

"I don't know. It's possible, I suppose, but not likely. All I know for sure is that I finally have a chance to count something that matters and not be seen doing it."

His blood had cooled enough for him to hold out his hand to her; Susan's had cooled enough for her to take it in good confidence. She had put her glove back on again, however. Better safe than sorry.

"Come on," she said. "I know a path."

In the moon's pale half-light, Susan led him out of the orange grove and toward the thump and squeak of the oilpatch. Those sounds made Roland's back prickle; made him wish for one of the guns hidden under the bunk-house floorboards back at the Bar K.

"Ye can trust me, Will, but that doesn't mean I'll be much help to ye," she said in a voice just a notch above a whisper. "I've been within hearing distance of Citgo my whole life, but I could count the number of times I've actually been in it on the fingers of both hands, so I could. The first two or three were on dares from my friends."

"And then?"

"With my da. He were always interested in the Old People, and my Aunt Cord always said he'd come to a bad end, meddling in their leav-ings." She swallowed hard. "And he did come to a bad end, although I doubt it were the Old People responsible. Poor Da."

They had reached a smoothwire fence. Beyond it, the gantries of the oil wells stood against the sky like sentinels the size of Lord Perth. How many had she said were still working? Nineteen, he thought. The sound of them was ghastly—the sound of monsters being choked to death. Of course it was the kind of place that kids dared each other to go into; a kind of open-air haunted house.

He held two of the wires apart so she could slip between them, and she did the same for him. As he passed through, he saw a line of white porcelain cylinders marching down the post closest to him. A fencewire went through each.

"You understand what these are? Were?" he asked Susan, tapping one of the cylinders.

"Aye. When there was electricity, some went through here." She paused, then added shyly: "It's how I feel when you touch me."

He kissed her cheek just below her ear. She shivered and pressed a hand briefly against his cheek before drawing away. "I hope your friends will watch well."

"They will." "Is there a signal?"

"The whistle of the nighthawk. Let's hope we don't hear it." "Aye, be it so." She took his hand and drew him into the oilpatch.

The first time the gas-jet flared ahead of them, Will spat a curse under his breath (an obscenely energetic one she hadn't heard since her father died) and dropped the hand not holding hers to his belt.

"Be easy! It's only the candle! The gas-pipe!"

He relaxed slowly. "That they use, don't they?"

"Aye. To run a few machines—little more than toys, they are. To make ice, mostly."

"I had some the day we met the Sheriff."

When the flare licked out again—bright yellow with a bluish core—he didn't jump. He glanced at the three gas-storage tanks behind what Hambry-folk called "the candle" without much interest. Nearby was a stack of rusty canisters in which the gas could be bottled and carried.

"You've seen such before?" she asked.

He nodded.

"The Inner Baronies must be very strange and wonderful," Susan said. •

"I'm beginning to think they're no stranger than those of the Outer Arc," he said, turning slowly. He pointed. "What's yon building down there? Left over from the Old People?"

"Aye."

To the east of Citgo, the ground dropped sharply down a thickly wooded slope with a lane cut through the middle of it—this lane was as clear in the moonlight as a part in hair. Not far from the bottom of the slope was a crumbling building surrounded by rubble. The tumble-and-strew was the detritus of many fallen smokestacks—that much could be extrapolated from the one which still stood. Whatever else the Old People had done, they had made lots of smoke.

"There were useful things in there when my da was a child," she said.

"Paper and such—even a few ink-writers that would still work ... for a little while, at least. If you shook them hard." She pointed to the left of the building, where there was a vast square of crumbled paving, and a few rusting hulks that had been the Old People's weird, horseless mode of travel. "Once there were things over there that looked like the gas-storage tanks, only much, much larger. Like huge silver cans, they were. They didn't rust like those that are left. I can't think what became of them, un-less someone hauled them off for water storage. I never

would. "Twould be unlucky, even if they weren't contaminated."

She turned her face up to his, and he kissed her mouth in the moonlight.

"Oh, Will. What a pity this is for you."

"What a pity for both of us," he said, and then passed between them one of those long and aching looks of which only teenagers are capable. They looked away at last and walked on again, hand-in-hand.

She couldn't decide which frightened her more—the few derricks that were still pumping or those dozens which had fallen silent. One thing she knew for sure was that no power on the face of the earth could have got-ten her within the fence of this place without a friend close beside her. The pumps wheezed; every now and then a cylinder screamed like some-one being stabbed; at periodic intervals "the candle" would fire off with a sound like dragon's breath, throwing their shadows out long in front of them. Susan kept her ears pitched for the nighthawk's piercing two-note whistle, and heard nothing.

They came to a wide lane—what had once undoubtedly been a main-tenance road—that split the oilpatch in two. Running down the center was a steel pipe with rusting joints. It lay in a deep concrete trough, with the upper arc of its rusty circumference protruding above ground level.

"What's this?" he asked.

"The pipe that took the oil to yon building, I reckon. It means nothing, 'tis been dry for years."

He dropped to one knee, slid his hand carefully into the space be-tween the concrete sleeve and the pipe's rusty side. She watched him ner-vously, biting her lip to keep herself from saying something which would surely come out sounding weak or womanish: What if there were biting spiders down there in the forgotten dark? Or what if his hand got stuck? What would they do then?

Of that latter there had been no chance, she saw when he pulled his hand free. It was slick and black with oil.

"Dry for years?" he asked with a little smile.

She could only shake her head, bewildered.

They followed the pipe toward a place where a rotten gate barred the road. The

pipe (she could now see oil bleeding out of its old joints, even in the weak moonlight) ducked under the gate; they went over it. She thought his hands rather too intimate for polite company in their helping, and rejoiced at each touch. *If he doesn't stop, the top of my head will ex-plode like "the candle,"* she thought, and laughed.

"Susan?"

" 'Tis nothing, Will, only nerves."

Another of those long glances passed between them as they stood on the far side of the gate, and then they went down the hill together. As they walked, she noticed an odd thing: many of the pines had been stripped of their lower branches. The hatchet marks and scabs of pine resin were clear in the moonlight, and looked new. She pointed this out to Will, who nodded but said nothing.

At the bottom of the hill, the pipe rose out of the ground and, supported on a series of rusty steel cradles, ran about seventy yards toward the abandoned building before stopping with the ragged suddenness of a battlefield amputation. Below this stopping point was what looked like a shallow lake of drying, tacky oil. That it had been there for awhile Susan could tell from the numerous corpses of birds she could see scattered across it—they had come down to investigate, become stuck, and stayed to die in what must have been an unpleasantly leisurely fashion.

She stared at this with wide, uncomprehending eyes until Will tapped her on the leg. He had hunkered down. She joined him knee-to-knee and followed the sweeping movement of his finger with growing disbelief and confusion. There were tracks here. Very big ones. Only one thing could have made them.

"Oxen," she said.

"Aye. They came from there." He pointed at the place where the pipe ended. "And they go—" He turned on the soles of his boots, still hunkered, and pointed back toward the slope where the woods started. Now that he pointed them out, she easily saw what she should have seen at once, horseman's daughter that she was. A perfunctory effort had been made to hide the tracks and the churned-up ground where something heavy had been dragged or rolled. Time had smoothed away more of the mess, but the marks were still clear. She even thought she knew what the oxen had been dragging, and she could see that Will knew, as well.

The tracks split off from the end of the pipe in two arcs. Susan and "Will

Dearborn" followed the right-hand one. She wasn't surprised to see ruts mingled in with the tracks of the oxen. They were shallow—it had been a dry summer, by and large, and the ground was nearly as hard as concrete—but they were there. To still be able to see them at all meant that some goodly amount of weight had been moved. And aye, of course; why else would oxen be needed?

"Look," Will said as they neared the hem of forest at the foot of the slope. She finally saw what had caught his attention, but she had to get down on her hands and knees to do it—how sharp his eyes were! Almost supernaturally so. There were boot-tracks here. Not fresh, but they were a lot newer than the tracks of the oxen and the wheelruts.

"This was the one with the cape," he said, indicating a clear pair of tracks.

"Reynolds."

"Will! Thee can't know it!"

He looked surprised, then laughed. "Sure I can. He walks with one foot turned in a little—the left foot. And here it is." He stirred the air over the tracks with the tip of his finger, then laughed again at the way she was look-ing at him. " 'Tisn't sorcery, Susan daughter of Patrick; only trailcraft."

"How do ye know so much, so young?" she asked. "Who are ye, Will?"

He stood up and looked down into her eyes. He didn't have to look far; she was tall for a girl. "My name's not Will but Roland," he said. "And now I've put my life in your hands. That I don't mind, but mayhap I've put your own life at risk, as well. You must keep it a dead secret."

"Roland," she said wonderingly. Tasting it.

"Aye. Which do you like better?"

"Your real one," she said at once. " 'Tis a noble name, so it is."

He grinned, relieved, and this was the grin that made him look young again. She raised herself on her toes and put her lips on his. The kiss, which was chaste and close-mouthed to begin with, bloomed like a flower: became open and slow and humid. She felt his tongue touch her lower lip and met it, shyly at first, with her own. His hands covered her back, then slipped around to her front. He touched her breasts, also shy to begin with, then slid his palms up their lower slopes to their tips. He uttered a small, moaning sigh directly into her mouth. And as he drew her closer and began to trail kisses down her neck, she felt the stone hardness of him below the buckle of his belt, a slim, warm length which exactly matched

the melting she felt in the same place; those two places were meant for each other, as she was for him and he for her. It was *ka*, after all—*ka* like the wind, and she would go with it willingly, leaving all honor and promises behind.

She opened her mouth to tell him so, and then a queer but utterly per-suasive sensation enfolded her: they were being watched. It was ridicu-lous, but it was there; she even felt she knew who was watching. She stepped back from Roland, her booted heels rocking unsteadily on the half-eroded oxen tracks. "Get out, ye old bitch," she breathed. "If ye be spying on us in some way, I know not how, *get thee gone!*"

## 15

On the hill of the Coos, Rhea drew back from the glass, spitting curses in a voice so low and harsh that she sounded like her own snake. She didn't know what Susan had said—no sound came through the glass, only sight—but she knew that the girl had sensed her. And when she did, all sight had been wiped out. The glass had flashed a brilliant pink, then had gone dark, and none of the passes she made over it would serve to brighten it again.

"Aye, fine, let it be so," she said at last, giving up. She remembered the wretched, prissy girl (not so prissy with the young man, though, was she?) standing hypnotized in her doorway, remembered what she had told the girl to do after she had lost her maidenhead, and began to grin, all her good humor restored. For if she lost her maidenhead to this wandering boy instead of to Hart Thorin, Lord High Mayor of Mejis, the comedy would be even greater, would it not?

Rhea sat in the shadows of her stinking hut and began to cackle.

## 16

Roland stared at her, wide-eyed, and as Susan explained about Rhea a lit-tle more fully (she left out the humiliating final examinations which lay at the heart of "proving honesty"), his desire cooled just enough for him to reassert control. It had nothing to do with jeopardizing the position he and his friends were trying to maintain in Hambry (or so he told himself) and everything to do with maintaining Susan's—her position was important, her honor even more so.



"I imagine it was your imagination," he said when she had finished.

"I think not." With a touch of coolness.

"Or conscience, even?"

At that she lowered her eyes and said nothing.

"Susan, I would not hurt you for the world."

"And ye love me?" Still without looking up.

"Aye, I do."

"Then it's best you kiss and touch me no more—not tonight. I can't stand it if ye do."

He nodded without speaking and held out his hand. She took it, and they walked on in the direction they had been going when they had been so sweetly distracted.

While they were still ten yards from the hem of the forest, both saw the glimmer of metal despite the dense foliage—*too dense*, she thought. *Too dense by far*.

It was the pine-boughs, of course; the ones which had been whacked from the trees on the slope. What they had been interlaced to camouflage were the big silver cans now missing from the paved area. The silver storage containers had been dragged over here—by the oxen, presumably—and then concealed. But why?

Roland inspected along the line of tangled pine branches, then stopped and plucked several aside. This created an opening like a door-way, and he gestured her to go through. "Be sharp in your looks," he said. "I doubt if they've bothered to set traps or tripwires, but 'tis always best to be careful."

Behind the camouflaging boughs, the tankers had been as neatly lined up as toy soldiers at the end of the day, and Susan at once saw one reason why they had been hidden: they had been re-equipped with wheels, well-made ones of solid oak which came as high as her chest. Each had been rimmed with a thin iron strip. The wheels were new, so were the strips, and the hubs had been custom-made. Susan knew only one blacksmith in Barony capable of such fine work: Brian Hookey, to whom she had gone for Felicia's new shoes. Brian Hookey, who had smiled and clapped her on the shoulder like a *compadre* when she had come in with her da's shoebag hanging on her hip. Brian Hookey, who had been one of Pat Delgado's best friends.

She recalled looking around and thinking that times had been good for sai Hookey, and of course she had been right. Work in the blacksmithing line had

been plentiful. Hookey had been making lots of wheels and rims, for one thing, and someone must have been paying him to do it. Eldred Jonas was one possibility; Kimba Rimer an even better one. Hart? She simply couldn't believe that. Hart had his mind—what little there was of it—fixed on other matters this summer.

There was a kind of rough path behind the tankers. Roland walked slowly along it, pacing like a preacher with his hands clasped at the small of his back, reading the incomprehensible words writ upon the tankers' rear decks: citgo. sunoco. exxon. conoco. He paused once and read aloud, haltingly: "Cleaner fuel for a better tomorrow." He snorted softly. "Rot! *This* is tomorrow."

"Roland—Will, I mean—what are they for? "

He didn't answer at first, but turned and walked back down the line of bright steel cans. Fourteen on this side of the mysteriously reactivated oil-supply pipe, and, she assumed, a like number on the other. As he walked, he rapped his fist on the side of each. The sound was dull and clunky. They were full of oil from the Citgo oilpatch.

"They were trigged quite some time ago, I imagine," he said. "I doubt if the Big Coffin Hunters did it all themselves, but they no doubt oversaw it ... first the fitting of the new wheels to replace the old rotten rubber ones, then the filling. They used the oxen to line them up here, at the base of the hill, because it was convenient. As it's convenient to let the extra horses run free out on the Drop. Then, when we came, it seemed prudent to take the precaution of covering these up. Stupid babies we might be, but perhaps smart enough to wonder about twenty-eight loaded oil-carts with new wheels. So they came out here and covered them."

"Jonas, Reynolds, and Depape."

"Aye."

"But why?" She took him by the arm and asked her question again. "What are they for? "

"For Parson," Roland said with a calm he didn't feel. "For the Good Man. The Affiliation knows he's found a number of war-machines; they come either from the Old People or from some other where. Yet the Affilia-tion fears them not, because they don't work. They're silent. Some feel Farson has gone mad to put his trust in such broken things, but..."

"But mayhap they're not broken. Mayhap they only need this stuff. And mayhap

Farson knows it."

Roland nodded.

She touched the side of one of the tankers. Her fingers came away oily. She rubbed the tips together, smelled them, then bent and picked up a swatch of grass to wipe her hands. "This doesn't work in our machines. It's been tried. It clogs them."

Roland nodded again. "My fa—my folk in the Inner Crescent know that as well. And count on it. But if Farson has gone to this trouble—and split aside a troop of men to come and get these tankers, as we have word he has done—he either knows a way to thin it to usefulness, or he thinks he does. If he's able to lure the forces of the Affiliation into a battle in some close location where rapid retreat is impossible, and if he can use machine-weapons like the ones that go on treads, he could win more than a battle. He could slaughter ten thousand horse-mounted fighting men and win the war."

"But surely yer fathers know this . . . ?"

Roland shook his head in frustration. How much their fathers knew was one question. What they made of what they knew was another. What forces drove them—necessity, fear, the fantastic pride which had also been handed down, father to son, along the line of Arthur Eld—was yet a third. He could only tell her his clearest surmise.

"I think they daren't wait much longer to strike Farson a mortal blow. If they do, the Affiliation will simply rot out from the inside. And if that happens, a good deal of Mid-World will go with it."

"But . . ." She paused, biting her lip, shaking her head. "Surely even Farson must know . . . understand ..." She looked up at him with wide eyes. "The ways of the Old People are the ways of death. Everyone knows that, so they do."

Roland of Gilead found himself remembering a cook named Hax, dangling at the end of a rope while the rooks pecked up scattered bread-crumbs from beneath the dead man's feet. Hax had died for Farson. But before that, he had poisoned children for Farson.

"Death," he said, "is what John Parson's all about."

In the orchard again.

It seemed to the lovers (for so they now were, in all but the most physical sense) that hours had passed, but it had been no more than forty-five minutes. Summer's last moon, diminished but still bright, continued to shine above them.

She led him down one of the lanes to where she had tied her horse. Pylon nodded his head and whickered softly at Roland. He saw the horse had been rigged for silence—every buckle padded, and the stirrups themselves wrapped in felt.

Then he turned to Susan.

Who can remember the pangs and sweetness of those early years? We remember our first real love no more clearly than the illusions that caused us to rave during a high fever. On that night and beneath that fading moon, Roland Deschain and Susan Delgado were nearly torn apart by their desire for each other; they floundered for what was right and ached with feelings that were both desperate and deep.

All of which is to say that they stepped toward each other, stepped back, looked into each other's eyes with a kind of helpless fascination, stepped forward again, and stopped. She remembered what he had said with a kind of horror: that he would do anything for her but share her with another man. She would not—perhaps *could* not—break her promise to Mayor Thorin, and it seemed that Roland would not (or *could* not) break it for her. And here was the most horrible thing of all: strong as the wind of *ka* might be, it appeared that honor and the promises they had made would prove stronger.

"What will ye do now?" she asked through dry lips.

"I don't know. I must think, and I must speak with my friends. Will you have trouble with your aunt when you go home? Will she want to know where you've been and what you've been doing?"

"Is it me you're concerned about or yourself and yer plans, Willy?"

He didn't respond, only looked at her. After a moment, Susan dropped her eyes.

"I'm sorry, that was cruel. No, she'll not tax me. I often ride at night, although not often so far from the house."

"She won't know how far you've ridden?"

"Nay. And these days we tread carefully around each other. It's like having two powder magazines in the same house." She reached out her hands. She had tucked her gloves into her belt, and the fingers which grasped his fingers were cold.

"This'll have no good end," she said in a whisper.

"Don't say that, Susan."

"Aye, I do. I must. But whatever comes, I love thee, Roland."

He took her in his arms and kissed her. When he released her lips, she put them to his ear and whispered, "If you love me, then love me. Make me break my promise."

For a long moment when her heart didn't beat, there was no response from him, and she allowed herself to hope. Then he shook his head—only the one time, but firmly. "Susan, I cannot."

"Is yer honor so much greater than yer professed love for me, then? Aye? Then let it be so." She pulled out of his arms, beginning to cry, ignoring his hand on her boot as she swung up into the saddle—his low call to wait, as well. She yanked free the slipknot with which Pylon had been tethered and turned him with one spurless foot. Roland was still calling to her, louder now, but she flung Pylon into a gallop and away from him before her brief flare of rage could go out. He would not take her used, and her promise to Thorin had been made before she knew Roland walked the face of the earth. That being so, how dare he insist that the loss of honor and consequent shame be hers alone? Later, lying in her sleepless bed, she would realize he had insisted nothing. And she was not even clear of the orange grove before raising her left hand to the side of her face, feeling the wetness there, and realizing that he had been crying, too.



18

Roland rode the lanes outside town until well past moonset, trying to get his roaring emotions under some kind of control. He would wonder for awhile what he was going to do about their discovery at Citgo, and then his thoughts would shift to Susan again. Was he a fool for not taking her when she wanted to be taken? For not sharing what she wanted to share? *If you love me, then love me.* Those words had nearly torn him open. Yet in the deep rooms of his heart rooms where the clearest voice was that of his father he felt he had not been wrong. Nor was it just a matter of honor, whatever she might think. But let her think that if she

would; better she should hate him a little, perhaps, than realize how deep the danger was for both of them.

Around three o' the clock, as he was about to turn for the Bar K, he heard the rapid drumming of hoofbeats on the main road, approaching from the west. Without thinking about why it seemed so important to do so, Roland swung back in that direction, then brought Rusher to a stop behind a high line of run-to-riot hedges. For nearly ten minutes the sound of the hoofbeats continued to swell—sound carried far in the deep quiet of early morning—and that was quite enough time for Roland to feel he knew who was riding toward Hambry hell-for-leather just two hours before dawn. Nor was he mistaken. The moon was down, but he had no trouble, even through the brambly interstices of the hedge, recognizing Roy Depape. By dawn the Big Coffin Hunters would be three again.

Roland turned Rusher back the way he had been heading, and rode to rejoin his own friends.

## **CHAPTER X**

### **BIRD AND BEAR AND HARE AND FISH**

1

The most important day of Susan Delgado's life—the day upon which her life turned like a stone upon a pivot—came about two weeks after her moonlit tour of the oilpatch with Roland. Since then she had seen him only half a dozen times, always at a distance, and they had raised their hands as passing acquaintances do

when their errands bring them briefly into sight of one another. Each time this happened, she felt a pain as sharp as a knife twisting in her ... and though it was no doubt cruel, she hoped he felt the same twist of the knife. If there was anything good about those two miserable weeks, it was only that her great fear—that gossip might begin about herself and the young man who called himself Will Dear-born—subsided, and she found herself actually sorry to feel it ebb. Gos-sip? There was nothing to gossip *about*.

Then, on a day between the passing of the Peddler's Moon and the rise of the Huntress, *ka* finally came and blew her away—house and barn and all. It began with someone at the door.

## 2

She had been finishing the washing—a light enough chore with only two women to do it for—when the knock came.

"If it's the ragman, send him away, ye mind!" Aunt Cord called from the other room, where she was turning bed linen.

But it wasn't the ragman. It was Maria, her maid from Seafront, look-ing woeful. The second dress Susan was to wear on Reaping Day—the silk meant for luncheon at Mayor's House and the Conversational after-ward—was ruined, Maria said, and she was in hack because of it. Would be sent back to Onnie's Ford if she wasn't lucky, and she the only support of her mother and father— oh, it was hard, much too hard, so it was. Could Susan come? Please?

Susan was happy to come—was always happy to get out of the house these days, and away from her aunt's shrewish, nagging voice. The closer Reaping came, the less she and Aunt Cord could abide each other, it seemed.

They took Pylon, who was happy enough to carry two girls riding double through the morning cool, and Maria's story was quickly told. Susan understood almost at once that Maria's position at Seafront wasn't really in much jeopardy; the little dark-haired maid had simply been using her innate (and rather charming) penchant for creating drama out of what was really not very dramatic at all.

The second Reaping dress (which Susan thought of as Blue Dress With Beads; the first, her breakfast dress, was White Dress With High Waist and Puffed Sleeves) had been kept apart from the others—it needed a bit of work yet—and something



had gotten into the first-floor sewing room and gnawed it pretty much to rags. If this had been the costume she was to wear to the bonfire lighting, or the one she was to wear to the ball-room dance after the bonfire had been lit, the matter would indeed have been serious. But Blue Dress With Beads was essentially just a fancified day receiving dress, and could easily be replaced in the two months be-tween now and the Reap. Only two! Once—on the night the old witch had granted her her reprieve—it had seemed like eons before she would have to begin her bed-service to Mayor Thorin. And now it was only two months! She twisted in a kind of involuntary protest at the thought.

"Mum?" Maria asked. Susan wouldn't allow the girl to call her sai, and Maria, who seemed incapable of calling her mistress by her given name, had settled on this compromise. Susan found the term amusing, given the fact that she was only sixteen, and Maria herself probably just two or three years older. "Mum, are you all right?"

"Just a crick in my back, Maria, that's all."

"Aye, I get those. Fair bad, they are. I've had three aunts who've died of the wasting disease, and when I get those twinges, I'm always afeard that—"

"What kind of animal chewed up Blue Dress? Do ye know?"

Maria leaned forward so she could speak confidentially into her mis-tress's ear, as if they were in a crowded marketplace alley instead of on the road to Seafront. "It's put about that a raccoon got in through a window that 'us opened during the heat of the day and was then forgot at day's end, but I had a good sniff of that room, and Kimba Rimer did, too, when he came down to inspect. Just before he sent me after you, that was."

"What did you smell?"

Maria leaned close again, and this time she actually whispered, al-though there was no one on the road to overhear: "Dog farts."

There was a moment of thunderstruck silence, and then Susan began to laugh. She laughed until her stomach hurt and tears went streaming down her cheeks.

"Are ye saying that W-W-Wolf... the Mayor's own *d-d-dog* ... got into the downstairs seamstress's closet and chewed up my Conversational d-d—" But she couldn't finish. She was simply laughing too hard.

"Aye," Maria said stoutly. She seemed to find nothing unusual about Susan's laughter . . . which was one of the things Susan loved about her. "But he's not to be

blamed, so I say, for a dog will follow his natural instincts, if the way is open for him to do so. The downstairs maids—" She broke off. "You'd not tell the Mayor or Kimba Rimer this, I suppose, Mum?"

"Maria, I'm shocked at you—ye play me cheap."

"No, Mum, I play ye dear, so I do, but it's always best to be safe. All I meant to say was that, on hot days, the downstairs maids sometimes go into that sewing closet for their fives. It lies directly in the shadow of the watchtower, ye know, and is the coolest room in the house—even cooler than the main receiving rooms."

"I'll remember that," Susan said. She thought of holding the Luncheon and Conversational in the seamstress's beck beyond the kitchen when the great day came, and began to giggle again. "Go on."

"No more to say, Mum," Maria told her, as if all else were too obvious for conversation. "The maids eat their cakes and leave the crumbs. I reckon Wolf smelled em and this time the door was left open. When the crumbs was gone, he tried the dress. For a second course, like."

This time they laughed together.

### 3

But she wasn't laughing when she came home.

Cordelia Delgado, who thought the happiest day of her life would be the one when she finally saw her troublesome niece out the door and the annoying business other defloration finally over, bolted out other chair and hurried to the kitchen window when she heard the gallop of approaching hoofs about two hours after Susan had left with that little scrap of a maid to have one of her dresses refitted. She never doubted that it was Susan returning, and she never doubted it was trouble. In ordinary circumstances, the silly twist would never gallop one of her beloved horses on a hot day.

She watched, nervously dry-washing her hands, as Susan pulled Py-lon up in a very unDelgado-like scrunch, then dismounted in an unlady-like leap. Her braid had come half undone, spraying that damned blonde hair that was her vanity (and her curse) in all directions. Her skin was pale, except for twin patches of color flaring high on her cheekbones. Cordelia didn't like the look of those at all. Pat had always flared in that same place when he was scared or angry.

She stood at the sink, now biting her lips as well as working her hands. Oh, 'twould be so good to see the back of that troublesome she. "Ye haven't made trouble, have ye?" she whispered as Susan pulled the saddle from Pylon's back and then led him toward the barn. "You better not have, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty. Not at this late date. You better not have."

#### 4

When Susan came in twenty minutes later, there was no sign of her aunt's strain and rage; Cordelia had put them away as one might store a dangerous weapon—a gun, say—on a high closet shelf. She was back in her rocker, knitting, and the face she turned to Susan's entry had a surface serenity. She watched the girl go to the sink, pump cold water into the basin, and then splash it on her face. Instead of reaching for a towel to pat herself dry, Susan only looked out the window with an expression that frightened Cordelia badly. The girl no doubt fancied that look haunted and desperate; to Cordelia, it looked only childishly willful.

"All right, Susan," she said in a calm, modulated voice. The girl would never know what a strain it was to achieve that tone, let alone maintain it. Unless she was faced with a willful teenager of her own one day, that was. "What's fashed thee so?"

Susan turned to her—Cordelia Delgado, just sitting there in her rocker, calm as a stone. In that moment Susan felt she could fly at her aunt and claw her thin, self-righteous face to strings, screaming *This is your fault! Yours! All yours!* She felt soiled—no, that wasn't strong enough; she *felt filthy*, and nothing had really happened. In a way, that was the horror of it. Nothing had really *happened yet*.

"It shows?" was all she said.

"Of course it does," Cordelia replied. "Now tell me, girl. Has he been on thee?"

"Yes ... no ... no."

Aunt Cord sat in her chair, knitting in her lap, eyebrows raised, waiting for more. At last Susan told her what had happened, speaking in a tone that was mostly flat—a little tremble intruded toward the end, but that was all. Aunt Cord began to feel a cautious sort of relief. Perhaps more goose-girl nerves was all it came down to, after all!

The substitute gown, like all the substitutes, hadn't been finished off; there was too

much else to do. Maria had therefore turned Susan over to blade-faced Conchetta Morgenstem, the chief seamstress, who had led Susan into the downstairs sewing room without saying anything—if saved words were gold, Susan had sometimes reflected, Conchetta would be as rich as the Mayor's sister was reputed to be. Blue Dress With Beads was draped over a headless dressmaker's dummy crouched beneath one low eave, and although Susan could see ragged places on the hem and one small hole around to the back, it was by no means the tattered ruin she had been expecting.

"Can it not be saved?" she asked, rather timidly.

"No," Conchetta said curtly. "Get out of those trousers, girl. Shirt, too."

Susan did as she was bid, standing barefoot in the cool little room with her arms crossed over her bosom . . . not that Conchetta had ever shown the slightest interest in what she had, back or front, above or below.

Blue Dress With Beads was to be replaced by Pink Dress With Ap-plique, it seemed. Susan stepped into it, raised the straps, and stood pa-tiently while Conchetta bent and measured and muttered, sometimes using a bit of chalk to write numbers on a wall-stone, sometimes grabbing a swag of material and pulling it tighter against Susan's hip or waist, checking the look in the full-length mirror on the far wall. As always dur-ing this process, Susan slipped away mentally, allowing her mind to go where it wanted. Where it wanted to go most frequently these days was into a daydream of riding along the Drop with Roland, the two of them side by side, finally stopping in a willow grove she knew that overlooked Hambry Creek.

"Stand there still as you can," Conchetta said curtly. "I be back."

Susan was hardly aware she was gone; was hardly aware she was in Mayor's House at all. The part of her that really mattered *wasn't* there. That part was in the willow grove with Roland. She could smell the faint half-sweet, half-acrid perfume of the trees and hear the quiet gossip of the stream as they lay down together forehead to forehead. He traced the shape of her face with the palm of his hand before taking her in his arms . . .

This daydream was so strong that at first Susan responded to the arms which curled around her waist from behind, arching her back as they first caressed her stomach and then rose to cup her breasts. Then she heard a kind of plowing, snorting breath in her ear, smelled tobacco, and under-stood what was happening.

Not Roland touching her breasts, but Hart Thorin's long and skinny fingers. She looked in the mirror and saw him looming over her left shoulder like an incubus. His eyes were bulging, there were big drops of sweat on his forehead in spite of the room's cool-ness, and his tongue was actually hanging out, like a dog's on a hot day. Revulsion rose in her throat like the taste of rotten food. She tried to pull away and his hands tightened their hold, pulling her against him. His knuckles cracked obscenely, and now she could feel the hard lump at the center of him. At times over the last few weeks, Susan had allowed herself to hope that, when the time came, Thorin would be incapable—that he would be able to make no iron at the forge. She had heard this often happened to men when they got older. The hard, throbbing column which lay against her bottom disabused her of that wistful notion in a hurry.

She had managed at least a degree of diplomacy by simply putting her hands over his and attempting to draw them off her breasts instead of pulling away from him again (Cordelia, impassive, not showing the great relief she felt at this).

"Mayor Thorin—Hart—you mustn't—this is hardly the place and not yet the time—Rhea said—"

"Balls to her and all witches!" His cultured politician's tones had been replaced by an accent as thick as that in the voice of any back-country farmhand from Onnie's Ford. "I must have something, a bonbon, aye, so I must. Balls to the witch, I say! Owlshit to 'er!" The smell of tobacco a thick reek around her head. She thought that she would vomit if she had to smell it much longer. "Just stand still, girl. Stand still, my temptation. Mind me well!"

Somehow she did. There was even some distant part of her mind, a part totally dedicated to self-preservation, that hoped he would mistake her shudders of revulsion for maidenly excitement. He had drawn her tight against him, hands working energetically on her breasts, his respiration a stinky steam-engine in her ear. She stood back to him, her eyes closed, tears squeezing out from beneath the lids and through the fringes of her lashes.

It didn't take him long. He rocked back and forth against her, moaning like a man with stomach cramps. At one point he licked the lobe of her ear, and Susan thought her skin would crawl right off her body in its revulsion. Finally, thankfully, she felt him begin to spasm against her.

"Oh, aye, get out, ye damned poison!" he said in a voice that was almost a squeal.

He pushed so hard she had to brace her hands against the wall to keep from being driven face-first into it. Then he at last stepped back.

For a moment Susan only stood as she was, with her palms against the rough cold stone of the sewing room wall. She could see Thorin in the mirror, and in his image she saw the ordinary doom that was rushing at her, the ordinary doom of which this was but a foretaste: the end of girl-hood, the end of romance, the end of dreams where she and Roland lay together in the willow grove with their foreheads touching. The man in the mirror looked oddly like a boy himself, one who's been up to something he wouldn't tell his mother about. Just a tall and gangly lad with strange gray hair and narrow twitching shoulders and a wet spot on the front of his trousers. Hart Thorin looked as if he didn't quite know where he was. In that moment the lust was flushed out of his face, but what replaced it was no better—that vacant confusion. It was as if he were a bucket with a hole in the bottom: no matter what you put in it, or how much, it always ran out before long. *He 'll do it again*, she thought, and felt an immense tiredness creep over her. *Now that he's done it once, he 'll do it every chance he gets, likely. From now on coming up here is going to be like . . . well . . .*

Like Castles. Like playing at Castles.

Thorin looked at her a moment longer. Slowly, like a man in a dream, he pulled the tail of his billowy white shirt out of his pants and let it drop around him like a skirt, covering the wet spot. His chin gleamed; he had drooled in his excitement. He seemed to feel this and wiped the wetness away with the heel of one hand, looking at her with those empty eyes all the while. Then some expression at last came into them, and without another word he turned and left the room.

There was a little scuffling thud in the hall as he collided with someone out there. Susan heard him mutter "Sorry! Sorry!" under his breath (it was more apology than he'd given her, muttered or not), and then Conchetta stepped back into the room. The swatch of cloth she'd gone after was draped around her shoulders like a stole. She took in Susan's pale face and tearstained cheeks at once. *She'll say nothing*, Susan thought. *None of them will, just as none of them will lift a finger to help me off this stick I've run myself on. "Ye sharpened it yourself, gilly," they'd say if I called for help, and that'll be their excuse for leaving me to wriggle.*

But Conchetta had surprised her. "Life's hard, missy, so it is. Best get used to it."

Susan's voice—dry, by now pretty much stripped of emotion—at last ceased. Aunt Cord put her knitting aside, got up, and put the kettle on for tea.

"Ye dramatize, Susan." She spoke in a voice that strove to be both kind and wise, and succeeded at neither. "It's a trait ye get from your Manchester side—half of them fancied themselves poets, t'other half fan-cied themselves painters, and almost all of them spent their nights too drunk to tapdance. He grabbed yer titties and gave yer a dry-hump, that's all. Nothing to be so upset over. Certainly nothing to lose sleep over."

"How would you know?" Susan asked. It was disrespectful, but she was beyond caring. She thought she'd reached a point where she could bear anything from her aunt except that patronizing worldly-wise tone of voice. It stung like a fresh scrape.

Cordelia raised an eyebrow and spoke without rancor. "How ye do love to throw that up to me! Aunt Cord, the dry old stick. Aunt Cord the spinster. Aunt Cord the graying virgin. Aye? Well, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty, virgin I *might* be, but I had a lover or two back when I was young . . . before the world moved on, ye might say. Mayhap one was the great Fran Lengyll."

*And mayhap not*, Susan thought; Fran Lengyll was her aunt's senior by at least fifteen years, perhaps as many as twenty-five.

"I've felt old Tom's goat on my backside a time or two, Susan. Aye, and on my frontside as well."

"And were any of these lovers sixty, with bad breath and knuckles that cracked when they squeezed your titties, Aunt? Did any of them try to push you through the nearest wall when old Tom began to wag his beard and say baa-baa-baa?"

The rage she expected did not come. What did was worse—an ex-pression close to the look of emptiness she had seen on Thorin's face in the mirror. "Deed's done, Susan." A smile, short-lived and awful, nick-ered like an eyelid on her aunt's narrow face. "Deed's done, aye."

In a kind of terror Susan cried: "My father would have hated this! *Hated* it! And hated you for allowing it to happen! For *encouraging* it to happen!"

"Mayhap," Aunt Cord said, and the awful smile winked at her again. "Mayhap so. And the only thing he'd hate more? The dishonor of a bro-ken promise, the shame

of a faithless child. He would want thee to go on with it, Susan. If thee would remember his face, thee *must* go on with it."

Susan looked at her, mouth drawn down in a trembling arc, eyes fill-ing with tears again. *I've met someone I love!* That was what she would have told her if she could. *Don't you understand how that changes things? I've met someone I love!* But if Aunt Cord had been the sort of person to whom she could have said such a thing, Susan would likely never have been impaled on this stick to begin with. So she turned and stumbled from the house without saying anything, her streaming eyes blurring her vision and filling the late summer world with rueful color.

## 6

She rode with no conscious idea of where she was going, yet some part of her must have had a very specific destination in mind, because forty min-utes after leaving her house, she found herself approaching the very grove of willows she had been daydreaming about when Thorin had crept up be-hind her like some bad elf out of a gammer's story.

It was blessedly cool in the willows. Susan tied Felicia (whom she had ridden out bareback) to a branch, then walked slowly across the little clearing which lay at the heart of the grove. Here the stream passed, and here she sat on the springy moss which carpeted the clearing. Of course she had come here; it was where she had brought all her secret griefs and joys since she had discovered the clearing at the age of eight or nine. It was here she had come, time and time again, in the nearly endless days af-ter her father's death, when it had seemed to her that the very world—her version of it, at least—had ended with Pat Delgado. It was only this clear-ing that had heard the full and painful measure of her grief; to the stream she had spoken it, and the stream had carried it away.

Now a fresh spate of tears took her. She put her head on her knees and sobbed—loud, unladylike sounds like the caw of squabbling crows. In that moment she thought she would have given anything—*everything*— to have her father back for one minute, to ask him if she must go on with this.

She wept above the brook, and when she heard the sound of a snap-ping branch, she started and looked back over her shoulder in terror and chagrin. This was her secret place and she didn't want to be found here, especially not when she was



bawling like a kiddie who has fallen and bumped her head. Another branch snapped. Someone was here, all right, invading her secret place at the worst possible time.

"Go away!" she screamed in a tear-clotted voice she barely recognized. "Go away, whoever ye are, be decent and leave me alone!"

But the figure—she could now see it—kept coming. When she saw who it was, she at first thought that Will Dearborn (*Roland*, she thought, *his real name is Roland*) must be a figment of her overstrained imagination. She wasn't entirely sure he was real until he knelt and put his arms around her. Then she hugged him with panicky tightness. "How did you know I was—"

"Saw you riding across the Drop. I was at a place where I go to think sometimes, and I saw you. I wouldn't have followed, except I saw that you were riding bareback. I thought something might be wrong."

"Everything's wrong."

Deliberately, with his eyes wide open and serious, he began kissing her cheeks. He had done it several times on both sides of her face before she realized he was kissing her tears away. Then he took her by the shoulders and held her back from him so he could look into her eyes.

"Say it again and I will, Susan. I don't know if that's a promise or a warning or both at the same time, but... say it again and I will."

There was no need to ask him what he meant. She seemed to feel the ground move beneath her, and later she would think that for the first and only time in her life she had actually felt *ka*, a wind that came not from the sky but from the earth. *It has come to me, after all*, she thought. *My ka, for good or ill.*

"Roland!"

"Yes, Susan."

She dropped her hand below his belt-buckle and grasped what was there, her eyes never leaving his.

"If you love me, then love me."

"Aye, lady. I will."

He unbuttoned his shirt, made in a part of Mid-World she would never see, and took her in his arms.

*Ka:*

They helped each other with their clothes; they lay naked in each other's arms on summer moss as soft as the finest goosedown. They lay with their foreheads touching, as in her daydream, and when he found his way into her, she felt pain melt into sweetness like some wild and exotic herb that may only be tasted once in each lifetime. She held that taste as long as she could, until at last the sweetness overcame it and she gave in to that, moaning deep in her throat and rubbing her forearms against the sides of his neck. They made love in the willow grove, questions of honor put aside, promises broken without so much as a look back, and at the end of it Susan discovered there was more than sweetness; there was a kind of delirious clinching of the nerves that began in the part of her that had opened before him like a flower; it began there and then filled her entire body. She cried out again and again, thinking there could not be so much pleasure in the mortal world; she would die of it. Roland added his voice to hers, and the sound of water rushing over stones wrapped around both. As she pulled him closer to her, locking her ankles together behind his knees and covering his face with fierce kisses, his going out rushed after hers as if trying to catch up. So were lovers joined in the Barony of Mejis, near the end of the last great age, and the green moss beneath the place where her thighs joined turned a pretty red as her virginity passed; so were they joined and so were they doomed.

*Ka.*

8

They lay together in each other's arms, sharing afterglow kisses beneath Felicia's mild gaze, and Roland felt himself drowsing. This was understandable—the strain on him that summer had been enormous, and he had been sleeping badly. Although he didn't know it then, he would sleep badly for the rest of his life.

"Roland?" Her voice, distant. Sweet, as well.

"Yes?"

"Will thee take care of me?"

"Yes."

"I can't go to him when the time comes. I can bear his touching, and his little

thefts—if I have you, I can—but I can't go to him on Reap Night. I don't know if I've forgotten the face of my father or not, but I cannot go to Hart Thorin's bed. There are ways the loss of a girl's virginity can be concealed, I think, but I won't use them. I simply cannot go to his bed."

"All right," he said, "good." And then, as her eyes widened in startlement, he looked around. No one was there. He looked back at Susan, fully awake now.

"What? What is it?"

"I might already be carrying your child," she said. "Has thee thought of that?" He hadn't. Now he did. A child. Another link in the chain stretching back into the dimness where Arthur Eld had led his gunslingers into battle with the great sword Excalibur raised above his head and the crown of All-World on his brow. But never mind that; what would his father think? Ur Gabrielle, to know she had become a grandmother?

A little smile had formed at the corners of his mouth, but the thought of his mother drove it away. He thought of the mark on her neck. When his mother came to his mind these days, he *always* thought of the mark he'd seen on her neck when he came unexpected into her apartment. And the small, rueful smile on her face.

"If you carry my child, such is my good fortune," he said.

"And mine." It was her turn to smile, but it had a sad look to it all the same, that smile. "We're too young, I suppose. Little more than kiddies ourselves."

He rolled onto his back and looked up at the blue sky. What she said might be true, but it didn't matter. Truth was sometimes not the same as reality—this was one of the certainties that lived in the hollow, cavey place at the center of his divided nature. That he could rise above both and willingly embrace the insanity of romance was a gift from his mother. All else in his nature was humorless . . . and, perhaps more important, without metaphor. That they were too young to be parents? What of that? If he had planted a seed, it would grow.

"Whatever comes, we'll do as we must. And I'll always love you, no matter what comes."

She smiled. He said it as a man would state any dry fact: sky is up, earth is down, water flows south.

"Roland, how old *are* you?" She was sometimes troubled by the idea that, young as she herself was, Roland was even younger. When he was concentrating on something, he could look so hard he frightened her. When he smiled, he looked

not like a lover but a kid brother.

"Older than I was when I came here," he said. "Older by far. And if I have to stay in sight of Jonas and his men another six months, I'll be hob-bling and needing a boost in the arse to get aboard my horse."

She grinned at that, and he kissed her nose.

"And thee'll take care of me?"

"Aye," he said, and grinned back at her. Susan nodded, then also turned on her back. They lay that way, hip to hip, looking up at the sky. She took his hand and placed it on her breast. As he stroked the nipple with his thumb, it raised its head, grew hard, and began to tingle. This sensation slipped quickly down her body to the place that was still throb-bing between her legs. She squeezed her thighs together and was both de-lighted and dismayed to find that doing so only made matters worse.

"Ye *must* take care of me," she said in a low voice. "I've pinned everything on you. All else is cast aside."

"I'll do my best," he said. "Never doubt it. But for now, Susan, you must go on as you have been. There's more time yet to pass; I know that because Depape is back and will have told his tale, but they still haven't moved in any way against us. Whatever he found out, Jonas still thinks it's in his interest to wait. That's apt to make him more dangerous when he *does* move, but for now it's still Castles."

"But after the Reaping Bonfire—Thorin—"

"You'll never go to his bed. That you can count on. I set my warrant on it."

A little shocked at her own boldness, she reached below his waist. "Here's a warrant ye can set on me, if ye would," she said.

He would. Could. And did.

When it was over (for Roland it had been even sweeter than the first time, if that was possible), he asked her: "That feeling you had out at Citgo, Susan—of being watched. Did you have it this time?"

She looked at him long and thoughtfully. "I don't know. My mind was in other places, ye ken." She touched him gently, then laughed as he jumped—the nerves in the half-hard, half-soft place where her palm stroked were still very lively, it seemed.

She took her hand away and looked up at the circle of sky above the grove. "So beautiful here," she murmured, and her eyes drifted closed.

Roland also felt himself drifting. It was ironic, he thought. This time she hadn't had that sensation of being watched ... but the second time, he had. Yet he would have sworn there was no one near this grove.

No matter. The feeling, megrim or reality, was gone now. He took Susan's hand, and felt her fingers slip naturally through his, entwining.

He closed his eyes.

## 9

All of this Rhea saw in the glass, and wery interesting viewing it made, aye, wery interesting, indeed. But she'd seen shagging before—sometimes with three or four or even more doing it all at the same time (sometimes with part-ners who were not precisely alive)—and the hokey-pokey wasn't very inter-esting to her at her advanced age. What she was interested in was what would come *after* the hokey-pokey.

*Is our business done?* the girl had asked.

*Mayhap there's one more little thing,* Rhea had responded, and then she told the impudent trull what to do.

Aye, she'd given the girl very clear instructions as the two of them stood in the hut doorway, the Kissing Moon shining down on them as Susan Delgado slept the strange sleep and Rhea stroked her braid and whispered instructions in her ear. Now would come the fulfillment of that interlude . . . and that was what she wanted to see, not two babbies shagging each other like they were the first two on earth to discover how 'twas done.

Twice they did it with hardly a pause to natter in between (she would have given a good deal to hear that natter, too). Rhea wasn't surprised; at his young age, she supposed the brat had enough spunkum in his sack to give her a week's worth of doubles, and from the way the little slut acted, that might be to her taste. Some of them discovered it and never wanted aught else; this was one, Rhea thought.

*But let's see how sexy you feel in a few minutes, you snippy bitch,* she thought, and leaned deeper into the pulsing pink light thrown from the glass. She could sometimes feel that light aching in the very bones of her face . . . but it was a *good* ache. Aye, wery good indeed.

They were at last done ... for the time being, at least. They clasped hands and

drifted off to sleep.

"Now," Rhea murmured. "Now, my little one. Be a good girl and do as ye were told."

As if hearing her, Susan's eyes opened—but there was nothing in them. They woke and slept at the same time. Rhea saw her gently pull her hand free of the boy's. She sat up, bare breasts against bare thighs, and looked around. She got to her feet—

That was when Musty, the six-legged cat, jumped into Rhea's lap, *waowing* for either food or affection. The old woman shrieked with sur-prise, and the wizard's glass at once went dark—puffed out like a candle-flame in a gust of wind.

Rhea shrieked again, this time with rage, and seized the cat before it could flee. She hurled it across the room, into the fireplace. That was as dead a hole as only a summer fireplace can be, but when Rhea cast a bony, misshapen hand at it, a yellow gust of flame rose from the single half-charred log lying in there. Musty screamed and fled from the hearth with his eyes wide and his split tail smoking like an indifferently butted cigar.

"Run, aye!" Rhea spat after him. "Begone, ye vile cusk!"

She turned back to the glass and spread her hands over it, thumb to thumb. But although she concentrated with all her might, willed until her heart was beating with a sick fury in her chest, she could do no more than bring back the ball's natural pink glow. No images appeared. This was bitterly disappointing, but there was nothing to be done. And in time she would be able to see the results with her own two natural eyes, if she cared to go to town and do so.

*Everybody* would be able to see.

Her good humor restored, Rhea returned the ball to its hiding place.

## 10

Only moments before he would have sunk too deep in sleep to have heard it, a warning bell went off in Roland's mind. Perhaps it was the faint realization that her hand was no longer entwined with his; perhaps it was raw intuition. He could have ignored that faint bell, and almost did, but in the end his training was too strong. He came up from the threshold of real sleep, fighting his way back to clarity as a diver kicks for the surface of a quarry. It was hard at first, but became

easier; as he neared wakefulness, his alarm grew.

He opened his eyes and looked to his left. Susan was no longer there. He sat up, looked to his right, and saw nothing above the cut of the stream ... yet he felt that she was in that direction, all the same.

"Susan?"

No response. He got up, looked at his pants, and Cort—a visitor he never would have expected in such a romantic bower as this—spoke up gruffly in his mind. *No time, maggot.*

He walked naked to the bank and looked down. Susan was there, all right, also naked, her back to him. She had unbraided her hair. It hung, loose gold, almost all the way to the lyre other hips. The chill air rising from the surface of the stream shivered the tips of it like mist.

She was down on one knee at the edge of the running water. One arm was plunged into it almost to the elbow; she searched for something, it seemed.

"Susan!"

No answer. And now a cold thought came to him: *She's been infested by a demon. While I slept, heedless, beside her, she's been infested by a demon.* Yet he did not think he really believed that. If there had been a de-mon near this clearing, he would have felt it. Likely both of them would have felt it; the horses, too. But *something* was wrong with her.

She brought an object up from the streambed and held it before her eyes in her dripping hand. A stone. She examined it, then tossed it back— *plunk*. She reached in again, head bent, two sheafs of her hair now actu-ally floating on the water, the stream prankishly tugging them in the direction it flowed. "*Susan!*"

No response. She plucked another stone out of the stream. This one was a triangular white quartz, shattered into a shape that was almost like the head of a spear. Susan tilted her head to the left and took a sheaf of her hair in her hand, like a woman who means to comb out a nest of tangles. But there was no comb, only the rock with its sharp edge, and for a mo-ment longer Roland remained on the bank, frozen with horror, sure that she meant to cut her own throat out of shame and guilt over what they'd done. In the weeks to come, he was haunted by a clear knowledge: if it *had* been her throat she'd intended, he wouldn't have been in time to stop her.

Then the paralysis broke and he hurled himself down the bank, un-mindful of the

sharp stones that gouged the soles of his feet. Before he reached her, she had already used the edge of the quartz to cut off part of the golden tress she held. Roland seized her wrist and pulled it back. He could see her face clearly now. What could have been mistaken for serenity from the top of the bank now looked like what it really was: vacuity, emptiness.

When he took hold of her, the smoothness of her face was replaced by a dim and fretful smile; her mouth quivered as if she felt distant pain, and an almost formless sound of negation came from her mouth:

*"Nnnnnnnnn—"*

Some of the hair she had cut off lay on her thigh like gold wire; most had fallen into the stream and been carried away. Susan pulled against Roland's hand, trying to get the sharp edge back to her hair, wanting to continue her mad barbering. The two of them strove together like arm-wrestlers in a barroom contest. And Susan was winning. He was physically the stronger, but not stronger than the enchantment which held her. Little by little the white triangle of quartz moved back toward her hanging hair. That frightening sound—*Nnnnnnnnnnn*—kept drifting from her mouth.

"Susan! Stop it! Wake up!"

*"Nnnnnnnnn—"*

Her bare arm quivering visibly in the air, the muscles bunched like hard little rocks. And the quartz moving closer and closer to her hair, her cheek, the socket of her eye.

Without thinking about it—it was the way he always acted most successfully—Roland moved his face close to the side of hers, giving up another four inches to the fist holding the stone in order to do it. He put his lips against the cup of her ear and then clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Clucked sidemouth, in fact.

Susan jerked back from that sound, which must have gone through her head like a spear. Her eyelids fluttered rapidly, and the pressure she was exerting against Roland's grip eased a little. He took the chance and twisted her wrist.

*"Ow!Owwww!"*

The stone flew out of her opening hand and splashed into the water. Susan gazed at him, now fully awake, her eyes filled with tears and bewilderment. She was rubbing her wrist. . . which, Roland thought, was likely to swell.



"Ye hurt me, Roland! Why did ye hurt m ..."

She trailed off, looking around. Now not just her face but the whole set other body expressed bewilderment. She moved to cover herself with her hands, then realized they were still alone and dropped them to her sides. She glanced over her shoulder at the footprints—all of them bare— leading down the bank.

"How did I get down here?" she asked. "Did thee carry me, after I fell asleep? And why did thee hurt me? Oh, Roland, I love thee—why did ye hurt me?"

He picked up the strands of hair that still lay on her thigh and held them in front of her. "You had a stone with a sharp edge. You were trying to cut yourself with it, and you didn't want to stop. I hurt you because I was scared. I'm just glad I didn't break your wrist ... at least, I don't think I did."

Roland took it and rotated it gently in either direction, listening for the grate of small bones.

He heard nothing, and the wrist turned freely. As Susan watched, stunned and confused, he raised it to his lips and kissed the inner part, above the delicate tracery of veins.

## 11

Roland had tied Rusher just far enough into the willows so the big geld-ing could not be seen by anyone who happened to come riding along the Drop.

"Be easy," Roland said, approaching. "Be easy a little longer, good-heart."

Rusher stamped and whickered, as if to say he could be easy until the end of the age, if that was what were required.

Roland nipped open his saddlebag and took out the steel utensil that served as either a pot or a frypan, depending on his needs. He started away, then turned back. His bedroll was tied behind Pusher's saddle he had planned to spend the night camped out on the Drop, thinking. There had been a lot to think about, and now there was even more.

He pulled one of the rawhide ties, reached inside the blankets, and pulled out a small metal box. This he opened with a tiny key he drew from around his neck. Inside the box was a small square locket on a fine silver chain (inside the locket was a line-drawing of his mother), and a handful of extra shells—not quite a dozen. He took one, closed it in his fist, and went back to Susan. She looked at

him with wide, frightened eyes.

"I don't remember anything after we made love the second time," she said. "Only looking up at the sky and thinking how good I felt and going to sleep. Oh, Roland, how bad does it look?"

"Not bad, I should think, but you'll know better than I. Here."

He dipped his cooker full of water and set it on the bank. Susan bent over it apprehensively, laying the hair on the left side of her head across her forearm, then moving the arm slowly outward, extending the tress in a band of bright gold. She saw the ragged cut at once. She examined it care-fully, then let it drop with a sigh more relieved than rueful.

"I can hide it," she said. "When it's braided, no one will know. And after all, 'tis only hair—no more than woman's vanity. My aunt has told me so often enough, certainly. But Roland, *why?* Why did I do it?"

Roland had an idea. If hair was a woman's vanity, then hair-chopping would likely be a woman's bit of nastiness—a man would hardly think of it at all. The Mayor's wife, had it been her? He thought not. It seemed more likely that Rhea, up there on her height of land looking north toward the Bad Grass, Hanging Rock, and Eyebolt Canyon, had set this ugly trap. Mayor Thorin had been meant to wake up on the morning after the Reap with a hangover and a bald-headed gilly.

"Susan, can I try something?"

She gave him a smile. "Something ye didn't try already up yonder? Aye, what ye will."

"Nothing like that." He opened the hand he had held closed, showing the shell. "I want to try and find out who did this to you, and why." And other things, too. He just didn't know what they were yet.

She looked at the shell. Roland began to move it along the back of his hand, dancing it back and forth in a dexterous weaving. His knuckles rose and fell like the heddles of a loom. She watched this with a child's fasci-nated delight. "Where did ye learn that?"

"At home. It doesn't matter."

"Ye'd hypnotize me?"

"Aye ... and I don't think it would be for the first time." He made the shell dance a bit faster—now east along his rippling knuckles, now west. "May I?"

"Aye," she said. "If you can."

He could, all right; the speed with which she went under confirmed that this had happened to Susan before, and recently. Yet he couldn't get what lie wanted from her. She was perfectly cooperative (*some sleep eager*, fort would have said), but beyond a certain point she would not go. It wasn't decorum or modesty, either—as she slept open-eyed before the stream, she told him in a far-off but calm voice about the old woman's examination, and the way Rhea had tried to "fiddle her up." (At this Poland's fists clenched so tightly his nails bit into his palms.) But there came a point where she could no longer remember.

She and Rhea had gone to the door of the hut, Susan said, and there they had stood with the Kissing Moon shining down on their faces. The old woman had been touching her hair, Susan remembered that much. The touch revolted her, especially after the witch's previous touches, but Susan had been unable to do anything about it. Arms too heavy to raise; tongue too heavy to speak. She could only stand there while the witch whispered in her ear.

"What?" Roland asked. "What did she whisper?"

"I don't know," Susan said. "The rest is pink."

"*Pink?* What do you mean?"

"Pink," she repeated. She sounded almost amused, as if she believed Roland was being deliberately dense. "She says, 'Aye, lovely, just so, it's a good girl y'are,' then everything's pink. Pink and bright."

"Bright."

"Aye, like the moon. And then . . ." She paused. "Then I think it *be-comes* the moon. The Kissing Moon, mayhap. A bright pink Kissing Moon, as round and full as a grapefruit."

He tried other ways into her memory with no success—every path he tried ended in that bright pinkness, first obscuring her recollection and then coalescing into a full moon. It meant nothing to Roland; he'd heard of blue moons, but never pink ones. The only thing of which he was sure was that the old woman had given Susan a powerful command to forget.

He considered taking her deeper—she would go—but didn't dare. Most of his experience came from hypnotizing his friends—classroom exercises that were

larky and occasionally spooky. Always there had been Cort or Vannay present to make things right if they went off-track. Now there were no teachers to step in; for better or worse, the students had been left in charge of the school. What if he took her deep and couldn't get her back up again? And he had been told there were demons in the below-mind as well. If you went down to where they were, they some-times swam out of their caves to meet you . . .

All other considerations aside, it was getting late. It wouldn't be prudent to stay here much longer.

"Susan, do you hear me?"

"Aye, Roland, I hear you very well."

"Good. I'm going to say a rhyme. You'll wake up as I say it. When I'm done, you'll be wide awake and remember everything we've said. Do you understand?"

"Aye."

"Listen: Bird and bear and hare and fish, Give my love her fond-est wish."

Her smile as she rose to consciousness was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen. She stretched, then put her arms around his neck and covered his face with kisses. "You, you, you, you," she said. "You're my fondest wish, Roland. You're my *only* wish. You and you, forever and ever."

They made love again there on the bank, beside the babbling stream, holding each other as tightly as they could, breathing into each other's mouths and living on each other's breath. *You, you, you, you.*

## 13

Twenty minutes later, he boosted her onto Felicia's back. Susan leaned down, took his face in her hands, and kissed him soundly.

"When will I see ye again?" she asked.

"Soon. But we must be careful."

"Aye. Careful as two lovers ever were, I think. Thank God thee's clever."

"We can use Sheemie, if we don't use him too often."

"Aye. And, Roland—do ye know the pavilion in Green Heart? Close to where they serve tea and cakes and things when the weather's fair?"

Roland did. Fifty yards or so up Hill Street from the jail and the Town Gathering Hall, Green Heart was one of the most pleasant places in town, with its quaint

paths, umbrella-shaded tables, grassy dancing pavilion, and menagerie.

"There's a rock wall at the back," she said. "Between the pavilion and the menagerie. If you need me badly—"

"I'll always need you badly," he said.

She smiled at his gravity. "There's a stone on one of the lower courses—a reddish one. You'll see it. My friend Amy and I used to leave messages there for each other when we were little girls. I'll look there when I can. Ye do the same."

"Aye." Sheemie would work for awhile, if they were careful. The red rock might also work for awhile, if they were careful. But no matter how careful they were, they would slip eventually, because the Big Coffin Hunters now probably knew more about Roland and his friends than Roland ever would have wished. But he had to see her, no matter what the risks. If he didn't, he felt he might die. And he only had to look at her to know she felt the same.

"Watch special for Jonas and the other two," he said.

"I will. Another kiss, if ye favor?"

He kissed her gladly, and would just as gladly have pulled her off the mare's back for a fourth go-round . . . but it was time to stop being deliri-ous and start being careful.

"Fare you well, Susan. I love y—" He paused, then smiled. "I love thee."

"And I thee, Roland. What heart I have is yours."

She had a great heart, he thought as she slipped through the willows, and already he felt its burden on his own. He waited until he felt sure she must be well away. Then he went to Rusher and rode off in the opposite direction, knowing that a new and dangerous phase of the game had begun.

## 14

Not too long after Susan and Roland had parted, Cordelia Delgado stepped out of the Hambry Mercantile with a box of groceries and a troubled mind. The troubled mind was caused by Susan, of course, always Susan, and Cordelia's fear that the girl would do something stupid before Reaping finally came around.

These thoughts were snatched out of her mind just as hands—strong ones—snatched the box of groceries from her arms. Cordelia cawed in surprise, shaded her eyes against the sun, and saw Eldred Jonas standing there between the

Bear and Turtle totems, smiling at her. His hair, long and white (and beautiful, in her opinion), lay over his shoulders. Cordelia felt her heart beat a little faster. She had always been partial to men like Jonas, who could smile and banter their way to the edge of risqueness . . . but who carried their bodies like blades.

"I startled you. I cry your pardon, Cordelia."

"Nay," she said, sounding a little breathless to her own ears. "It's just the sun—so bright at this time of day—"

"I'd help you a bit on your way, if you give me leave. I'm only going up High as far as the comer, then I turn up the Hill, but may I help you that far?"

"With thanks," she said. They walked down the steps and up the board sidewalk, Cordelia looking around in little pecking glances to see who was observing them—she beside the handsome sai Jonas, who just happened to be carrying her goods. There was a satisfying number of on-lookers. She saw Millicent Ortega, for one, looking out of Ann's Dresses with a satisfying 0 of surprise on her stupid cow's puss.

"I hope you don't mind me calling you Cordelia." Jonas shifted the box, which she'd needed two hands to carry, casually under one arm. "I feel, since the welcoming dinner at Mayor Thorin's house, that I know you."

"Cordelia's fine."

"And may I be Eldred to you?"

"I think 'Mr. Jonas' will do a bit longer," she said, then favored him with what she hoped was a coquettish smile. Her heart beat faster yet. (It did not occur to her that perhaps Susan was not the only silly goose in the Delgado family.)

"So be it," Jonas said, with a look of disappointment so comic that she laughed.

"And your niece? Is she well?"

"Quite well, thank ye for asking. A bit of a trial, sometimes—"

"Was there ever a girl of sixteen who wasn't?"

"I suppose not."

"Yet you have additional burdens regarding her this fall. I doubt if *he* realizes that, though."

Cordelia said nothing—'twouldn't be discreet—but gave him a meaningful look that said much.

"Give her my best, please."

"I will." But she wouldn't. Susan had conceived a great (and irrational, in

Cordelia's view) dislike for Mayor Thorin's regulators. Trying to talk her out of these feelings would likely do no good; young girls thought they knew everything. She glanced at the star peeking unobtrusively out from beneath the flap of Jonas's vest. "I understand ye've taken on an additional responsibility in our undeserving town, sai Jonas."

"Aye, I'm helping out Sheriff Avery," he agreed. His voice had a reedy little tremble which Cordelia found quite endearing, somehow. "One of his deputies—Claypool, his name is—"

"Frank Claypool, aye."

"—fell out of his boat and broke his leg. How do you fall out of a boat and break your leg, Cordelia?"

She laughed merrily (the idea that everyone in Hambry was watching them was surely wrong ... but it felt that way, and the feeling was not unpleasant) and said she didn't know.

He stopped on the corner of High and Camino Vega, looking regretful. "Here's where I turn." He handed the box back to her. "Are you sure you can carry that? I suppose I could go on with you to your house—"

"No need, no need. Thank you. Thank you, *Eldred*." The blush which crept up her neck and cheeks felt as hot as fire, but his smile was worth every degree of heat. He tipped her a little salute with two fingers and sauntered up the hill toward the Sheriff's office.

Cordelia walked on home. The box, which had seemed such a burden when she stepped out of the mercantile, now seemed to weigh next to nothing. This feeling lasted for half a mile or so, but by the time her house came into view, she was once again aware of the sweat trickling down her sides, and the ache in her arms. Thank the gods summer was almost over ... and wasn't that Susan, just leading her mare in through the gate?

"Susan!" she called, now enough returned to earth for her former irritation with the girl to sound clear in her voice. "Come and help me, 'fore I drop this and break the eggs!"

Susan came, leaving Felicia to crop grass in the front yard. Ten minutes earlier, Cordelia would have noticed nothing of how the girl looked—her thoughts had been too wrapped up in Eldred Jonas to admit of much else. But the hot sun had taken some of the romance out of her head and returned her feet to earth. And as

Susan took the box from her (handling it almost as easily as Jonas had done), Cordelia thought she didn't much care for the girl's appearance. Her temper had changed, for one thing—from the half-hysterical confusion in which she'd left to a pleasant and happy-eyed calmness. That was the Susan of previous years to the sleeve and seam . . . but not this year's moaning, moody breast-beater. There was nothing else Cordelia could put her finger on, except—

But there was, actually. One thing. She reached out and grasped the girl's braid, which looked uncharacteristically sloppy this afternoon. Of course Susan had been riding; that could explain the mess. But it didn't explain how dark her hair was, as if that bright mass of gold had begun to tarnish. And she jumped, almost guiltily, when she felt Cordelia's touch. Why, pray tell, was that?

"Yer hair's damp, Susan," she said. "Have ye been swimming some-where?"

"Nay! I stopped and ducked my head at the pump outside Hockey's barn. He doesn't mind—'tis a deep well he has. It's so hot. Perhaps there'll be a shower later. I hope so. I gave Felicia to drink as well."

The girl's eyes were as direct and as candid as ever, but Cordelia thought there was something off in them, just the same. She couldn't say what. The idea that Susan might be hiding something large and serious did not immediately cross Cordelia's mind; she would have said her niece was incapable of keeping a secret any greater than a birthday present or a surprise party . . . and not even such secrets as those for more than a day or two. And yet something *was* off here. Cordelia dropped her fingers to the collar of the girl's riding shirt.

"Yet this is dry."

"I was careful," she said, looking at her aunt with a puzzled eye. "Dirt sticks worse to a wet shirt. You taught me that, Aunt."

"Ye flinched when I touched yer hair, Susan."

"Aye," Susan said, "so I did. The weird-woman touched it just that same way. I haven't liked it since. Now may I take these groceries in and get my horse out of the hot sun?"

"Don't be pert, Susan." Yet the edginess in her niece's voice actually eased her in some strange way. That feeling that Susan had changed, somehow—that feeling of *offness*—began to subside.

"Then don't be tiresome."

"Susan! Apologize to me!"



Susan took a deep breath, held it, then let it out. "Yes, Aunt. I do. But it's hot."  
"Aye. Put those in the pantry. And thankee."

Susan went on toward the house with the box in her arms. When the girl had enough of a lead so they wouldn't have to walk together, Cordelia followed. It was all foolishness on her part, no doubt—suspicions brought on by her flirtation with Eldred—but the girl was at a dangerous age, and much depended on her good behavior over the next seven weeks. After that she would be Thorin's problem, but until then she was Cordelia's. Cordelia thought that, in the end, Susan would be true to her promise, but until Reaping Fair she would bear close watching. About such matters as a girl's virginity, it was best to be vigilant.

## INTERLUDE KANSAS, SOMEWHERE, SOMEWHEN

Eddie stirred. Around them the thinny still whined like an unpleasant mother-in-law; above them the stars gleamed as bright as new hopes . . . or bad intentions. He looked at Susannah, sitting with the stumps of her legs curled beneath her; he looked at Jake, who was eating a burrito; he looked at Oy, whose snout rested on Jake's ankle and who was looking up at the boy with an expression of calm adoration.

The fire was low, but still it burned. The same was true of Demon Moon, far in the west.

"Roland." His voice sounded old and rusty to his own ears.

The gunslinger, who had paused for a sip of water, looked at him with his eyebrows raised.

"How can you know every corner of this story?"

Roland seemed amused. "I don't think that's what you really want to know, Eddie." He was right about that—old long, tall, and ugly made a habit of being right. It was, as far as Eddie was concerned, one of his most irritating characteristics. "All right. How long have you been talking? *That's* what I really want to know."

"Are you uncomfortable? Want to go to bed?"

*He's making fun of me*, Eddie thought . . . but even as the idea occurred to him, he knew it wasn't true. And no, he *wasn't* uncomfortable. There was no stiffness in his joints, although he had been sitting cross-legged ever since Roland had begun by telling them about Rhea and the glass ball, and he didn't need to go to the toilet. Nor was he hungry. Jake was munching the single leftover burrito, but probably for the same reason folks climbed Mount Everest . . . because it was there. And why *should* he be hungry or sleepy or stiff? Why, when the fire still burned and the moon was not yet down?

He looked at Roland's amused eyes and saw the gunslinger was reading his thoughts.

"No, I don't want to go to bed. You know I don't. But, Roland . . . you've been talking a *long* time." He paused, looked down at his hands, then looked up again, smiling uneasily. "Days, I would have said."

"But time is different here. I've told you that; now you see for yourself. Not all nights are the same length just recently. Days, either . . . but we notice time more at night, don't we? Yes, I think we do."

"Is the thinny stretching time?" And now that he had mentioned it, Eddie could hear it in all its creepy glory—a sound like vibrating metal, or maybe the world's biggest mosquito.

"It might be helping, but mostly it's just how things are in my world."

Susannah stirred like a woman who rises partway from a dream that holds her like sweet quicksand. She gave Eddie a look that was both distant and impatient. "Let the man talk, Eddie."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Let the man talk."

And Oy, without raising his snout from Jake's ankle: "An. Awk."

"All right," Eddie said. "No problem."

Roland swept them with his eyes. "Are you sure? The rest is . . ." He didn't seem able to finish, and Eddie realized that Roland was scared.

"Go on," Eddie told him quietly. "Let the rest be what it is. What it was." He looked around. Kansas, they were in Kansas. Somewhere, somewhen. Except he felt that Mejis and those people he had never seen— Cordelia and Jonas and Brian Hookey and Sheemie and Pettie the Trotter and Cuthbert Allgood—were very close now. That Roland's lost Susan was very close now. Because reality was thin here—as thin as the seat in an old pair of blue jeans—and the dark would hold for as long as Roland needed it to hold. Eddie doubted if Roland even noticed the dark, particularly. Why would he? Eddie thought it had been night inside of Roland's mind for a long, long time . . . and dawn was still nowhere near. He reached out and touched one of those callused killer's hands. Gently he touched it, and with love.

"Go on, Roland. Tell your tale. All the way to the end."

"All the way to the end," Susannah said dreamily. "Cut the vein." Her eyes were full of moonlight.

"All the way to the end," Jake said.

"End," Oy whispered.

Roland held Eddie's hand for a moment, then let it go. He looked into the guttering fire without immediately speaking, and Eddie sensed him trying to find the way. Trying doors, one after another, until he found one that opened. What he saw behind it made him smile and look up at Eddie.

"True love is boring," he said.

*"Say what?"*

"True love is boring," Roland repeated. "As boring as any other strong and addicting drug. And, as with any other strong drug . . ."

# PART THREE COME, REAP



## CHAPTER 1

# BENEATH THE huntress moon

## 1

True love, like any other strong and addicting drug, is boring—once the tale of encounter and discovery is told, kisses quickly grow stale and caresses tiresome . . . except, of course, to those who share the kisses, who give and take the caresses while every sound and color of the world seems to deepen and brighten around them. As with any other strong drug, true first love is really only interesting to those who have become its prisoners. And, as is true of any other strong and addicting drug, true first love is dangerous.

## 2

Some called Huntress the last moon of summer; some called it the first of fall. Whichever it was, it signaled a change in the life of the Barony. Men put out into the bay wearing sweaters beneath their oilskins as the winds began to turn more and more firmly into autumn's east-west alley, and to sharpen as they turned. In the great Barony orchards north of Hambry (and in smaller orchards owned by John Croydon, Henry Wertner, Jake White, and the morose but wealthy Coral Thorin), the pickers began to appear in the rows, carrying their odd, off-kilter ladders; they were followed by horse-drawn carts full of empty barrels. Downwind of the cider-houses—especially downwind of the great Barony cider-mansion a mile north of Seafront—the breezy air was filled with the sweet tang of blems being pressed by the basketload. Away from the shore of the Clean Sea, the days remained warm as the Huntress waxed, skies were clear day and night, but summer's real heat had departed with the Peddler. The last cutting of hay began and was finished in the run of a week—that last one was always scant, and ranchers and freeholders alike would curse it, scratching their heads and asking themselves why they even bothered ... but come rainy, blowsy old March, with the

bam lofts and bins rapidly emptying, they always knew. In the Barony's gardens—the great ones of the ranch-ers, the smaller ones of the freeholders, and the tiny backyard plots of the townsfolk—men and women and children appeared in their old clothes and boots, their *sombreros* and *sombreros*. They came with the legs of their pants tied down firmly at the ankles, for in the time of the Huntress, snakes and scorpions in plentiful numbers wandered east from the desert. By the time old Demon Moon began to fatten, a line of rattlers would hang from the hitching posts of both the Travellers' Rest and the mercan-tile across the street. Other businesses would similarly decorate their hitching posts, but when the prize for the most skins was given on Reap-ing Day, it was always the inn or the market that won it. In the fields and gardens, baskets to pick into were cast along the rows by women with their hair tied up in kerchiefs and reap-charms hidden in their bosoms. The last of the tomatoes were picked, the last of the cucumbers, the last of the corn, the last of the parey and mingo. Waiting behind them, as the days sharpened and the autumn storms began to near, would come squash, sharproot, pumpkins, and potatoes. In Mejis the time of reaping had be-gun, while overhead, clearer and clearer on each starry night, the Huntress pulled her bow and looked east over those strange, watery leagues no man or woman of Mid-World had ever seen.

### 3

Those in the grip of a strong drug—heroin, devil grass, true love—often find themselves trying to maintain a precarious balance between secrecy and ecstasy as they walk the tightrope of their lives. Keeping one's bal-ance on a tightrope is difficult under the soberest circumstances; doing so while in a state of delirium is all but impossible. *Completely* impossible, in the long run.

Roland and Susan were delirious, but at least had the thin advantage of knowing it. And the secret would not have to be kept forever, but only until Reaping Day Fair, at the very longest. Things might end even sooner than that, if the Big Coffin Hunters broke cover. The actual first move might be made by one of the other players, Roland thought, but no matter who moved first, Jonas and his men would be there, a part of it. The part apt to be most dangerous to the three boys. Roland and Susan were careful—as careful as delirious people could be, at any

rate. They never met in the same place twice in a row, they never met at the same time twice in a row, they never skulked on their way to their trysts. In Hambry, riders were common but skulkers were no-ticed. Susan never tried to cover her "riding out" by enlisting the help of a friend (although she had friends who would have done her this service); people who needed alibis were people keeping secrets. She had a sense that Aunt Cord was growing increasingly uneasy about her rides—particularly the ones she took in the early evenings—but so far she accepted Susan's oft-repeated reason for them: she needed time to be solitary, to meditate on her promise and to accept her responsibility. Ironically, these suggestions had originally come from the witch of the Coos.

They met in the willow grove, in several of the abandoned boathouses which stood crumbling at the northern hook of the bay, in a herder's hut far out in the desolation of the Coos, in an abandoned squatter's shack hidden in the Bad Grass. The settings were, by and large, as sordid as any of those in which addicts come together to practice their vice, but Susan and Roland didn't see the rotting walls of the shack or the holes in the roof of the hut or smell the mouldering nets in the comers of the old soaked boathouses. They were drugged, stone in love, and to them, every scar on the face of the world was a beauty-mark.

Twice, early on in those delirious weeks, they used the red rock in the wall at the back of the pavilion to arrange meetings, and then some deep voice spoke inside Roland's head, telling him there must be no more of it—the rock might have been just the thing for children playing at secrets, but he and his love were no longer children; if they were discovered, ban-ishment would be the luckiest punishment they could hope for. The red rock was too conspicuous, and writing things down—even messages that were unsigned and deliberately vague—was horribly dangerous.

Using Sheemie felt safer to both of them. Beneath his smiling light-mindedness there was a surprising depth of ... well, discretion. Roland had thought long and hard before settling on that word, and it was the right word: an ability to keep silent that was more dignified than mere cunning. Cunning was out of Sheemie's reach in any case, and always would be—a man who couldn't tell a lie without shifting his eyes away from yours was a man who would never be considered cunning.

They used Sheemie half a dozen times over the five weeks when their physical

love burned at its hottest—three of those times were to make meetings, two were to change meeting-places, and one was to cancel a tryst when Susan spied riders from the Piano Ranch sweeping for strays near the shack in the Bad Grass.

That deep, warning voice never spoke to Roland about Sheemie as it had about the dangers of the red rock . . . but his conscience spoke to him, and when he finally mentioned this to Susan (the two of them wrapped in a saddle-blanket and lying naked in each other's arms), he found that her conscience had been troubling her, as well. It wasn't fair to put the boy in the way of their possible trouble. After coming to that conclusion, Roland and Susan arranged their meetings strictly between the two of them. If she could not meet him, Susan said, she would hang a red shirt over the sill of her window, as if to dry. If he could not meet her, he was to leave a white stone in the northeast corner of the yard, diagonally across the road from Hockey's Livery, where the town pump stood. As a last resort, they would use the red rock in the pavilion, risky or not, rather than bringing Sheemie into their affairs—their *affair*—again.

Cuthbert and Alain watched Roland's descent into addiction first with disbelief, envy, and uneasy amusement, then with a species of silent horror. They had been sent to what was supposed to have been safety and had discovered a place of conspiracy, instead; they had come to take census in a Barony where most of the aristocracy had apparently switched its allegiance to the Affiliation's bitterest enemy; they had made personal enemies of three hard men who had probably killed enough folks to populate a fair-sized graveyard. Yet they had felt equal to the situation, because they had come here under the leadership of their friend, who had attained near-mythic status in their minds by besting Cort—with a hawk as his weapon!—and becoming a gunslinger at the unheard-of age of fourteen. That they had been given guns themselves for this mission had meant a great deal to them when they set out from Gilead, and nothing at all by the time they began to realize the scope of what was going on in Hambry-town and the Barony of which it was a part. When that realization came, Roland was the weapon they counted on. And now—

"He's like a revolver cast into water!" Cuthbert exclaimed one evening, not long after Roland had ridden away to meet Susan. Beyond the bunkhouse porch, Huntress rose in her first quarter. "Gods know if it'll ever fire again, even if it's fished out and dried off."



"Hush, wait," Alain said, and looked toward the porch rail. Hoping to jolly Cuthbert out of his bad temper (a task that was quite easy under ordinary circumstances), Alain said: "Where's the lookout? Gone to bed early for once, has he?"

This only irritated Cuthbert more. He hadn't seen the rook's skull in days—he couldn't exactly say how many—and he took its loss as an ill omen. "Gone, but not to bed," he replied, then looked balefully to the west, where Roland had disappeared aboard his big old galoot of a horse. "Lost, I reckon. Like a certain fellow's mind and heart and good sense."

"He'll be all right," Alain said awkwardly. "You know him as well as I do, Bert—known him our whole lives, we have. He'll be all right."

Quietly, without even a trace of his normal good humor, Cuthbert said: "I don't feel I know him now."

They had both tried to talk to Roland in their different ways; both received a similar response, which was no real response at all. The dreamy (and perhaps slightly troubled) look of abstraction in Roland's eyes during these one-sided discussions would have been familiar to anyone who has ever tried to talk sense to a drug addict. It was a look that said Roland's mind was occupied by the shape of Susan's face, the smell of Susan's skin, the feel of Susan's body. And *occupied* was a silly word for it, one that fell short. It wasn't an occupation but an obsession. "I hate her a little for what she's done," Cuthbert said, and there was a note in his voice Alain had never heard before—a mixture of jealousy, frustration, and fear. "Perhaps more than a little."

"You mustn't!" Alain tried not to sound shocked, but couldn't help it. "She isn't responsible for—"

"Is she not? She went out to Citgo with him. She saw what he saw. God knows how much else he's told her after they've finished making the beast with two backs. And she's all the way around the world from stupid. Just the way she's managed her side of their affair shows that." Bert was thinking, Alain guessed, of her tidy little trick with the *corvette*. "She must know she's become part of the problem herself. She must *know* that!"

Now his bitterness was frighteningly clear. *He's jealous of her for stealing his best friend*, Alain thought, *but it doesn't stop there. He's jealous of his best friend, as well, because his best friend has won the most beautiful girl any of us have ever*

*seen.*

Alain leaned over and grasped Cuthbert's shoulder. When Bert turned away from his morose examination of the dooryard to look at his friend, he was startled by the grimness on Alain's face. "It's *ka*," Alain said.

Cuthbert almost sneered. "If I had a hot dinner for every time some-one blamed theft or lust or some other stupidity on *ka*—"

Alain's grip tightened until it became painful. Cuthbert could have pulled away but didn't. He watched Alain closely. The joker was, temporarily, at least, gone.

"Blame is exactly what we two can't afford," Alain said. "Don't you see that? And if it's *ka* that's swept them away, we needn't blame. We *can't* blame. We must rise above it. We need him. And we may need her, too."

Cuthbert looked into Alain's eyes for what seemed to be a very long time. Alain saw Bert's anger at war with his good sense. At last (and perhaps only for the time being), good sense won out.

"All right, fine. It's *ka*, everybody's favorite whipping-boy. That's what the great unseen world's for, after all, isn't it? So we don't have to take the blame for our acts of stupidity? Now let go of me, Al, before you break my shoulder."

Alain let go and sat back in his chair, relieved. "Now if we only knew what to do about the Drop. If we don't start counting there soon—"

"I've had an idea about that, actually," Cuthbert said. "It just needs a little working out. I'm sure Roland could help ... if either of us can get his attention for a few minutes, that is."

They sat for awhile without speaking, looking out at the dooryard. Inside the bunkhouse, the pigeons—another bone of contention between Roland and Bert these days—cooed. Alain rolled himself a smoke. It was slow work, and the finished product looked rather comical, but it held together when he lit it.

"Your father would stripe you raw if he saw that in your hand," Cuthbert remarked, but he spoke with a certain admiration. By the time the following year's Huntress came around, all three of them would be confirmed smokers, tanned young men with most of the boyhood slapped out of their eyes.

Alain nodded. The strong Outer Crescent tobacco made him swimmy in the head and raw in the throat, but a cigarette had a way of calming his nerves, and right now his nerves could use some calming. He didn't know about Bert, but these days he smelled blood on the wind. Possibly some of it would be their own. He wasn't

exactly frightened—not yet, at least— but he was very, very worried.

4

Although they had been honed like hawks toward the guns since early childhood, Cuthbert and Alain still carried an erroneous belief common to many boys their age: that their elders were also their betters, at least in such matters as planning and wit; they actually believed that grownups knew what they were doing. Roland knew better, even in his love-sickness, but his friends had forgotten that in the game of Castles, *both* sides wear the blindfold. They would have been surprised to find that at least two of the Big Coffin Hunters had grown extremely nervous about the three young men from In-World, and extremely tired of the waiting game both sides had been playing.

One early morning, as the Huntress neared the half, Reynolds and Depape came downstairs together from the second floor of the Travellers' Rest. The main public room was silent except for various snores and phlegmy wheezings. In Hambry's busiest bar, the party was over for an-other night.

Jonas, accompanied by a silent guest, sat playing Chancellors' Pa-tience at Coral's table to the left of the batwing doors. Tonight he was wearing his duster, and his breath smoked faintly as he bent over his cards. It wasn't cold enough to frost—not quite yet—but the frost would come soon. The chill in the air left no doubt of that. The breath of his guest also smoked. Kimba Rimer's skeletal frame was all but buried in a gray serape lit with faint bands of orange. The two of them had been on the edge of getting down to business when Roy and Clay (*Pinch and Jilly*, Rimer thought) showed up, their plowing and planting in the second-floor cribs also apparently over for another night.

"Eldred," Reynolds said, and then: "Sai Rimer."

Rimer nodded back, looking from Reynolds to Depape with thin dis-taste. "Long days and pleasant nights, gentlemen." Of course the world had moved on, he thought. To find such low culls as these two in posi-tions of importance proved it. Jonas himself was only a little better.

"Might we have a word with you, Eldred?" Clay Reynolds asked. "We've been talking, Roy and I—"

"Unwise," Jonas remarked in his wavery voice. Rimer wouldn't be surprised to

find, at the end of his life, that the Death Angel had such a voice. "Talking can lead to thinking, and thinking's dangerous for such as you boys. Like picking your nose with bullet-heads."

Depape donkeyed his damned hee-haw laughter, as if he didn't real-ize the joke was on him.

"Jonas, listen," Reynolds began, and then looked uncertainly at Rimer.

"You can talk in front of sai Rimer," Jonas said, laying out a fresh line of cards.

"He is, after all, our chief employer. I play at Chancellors' Patience in his honor, so I do."

Reynolds looked surprised. "I thought . . . that is to say, I believed that Mayor Thorin was ..."

"Hart Thorin wants to know none of the details of our arrangement with the Good Man," Rimer said. "A share of the profits is all he requires in that line, Mr. Reynolds. The Mayor's chief concern right now is that the Reaping Day Fair go smoothly, and that his arrangements with the young lady be ... smoothly consummated."

"Aye, that's a diplomatic turn o' speech for ye," Jonas said in a broad Mejis accent.

"But since Roy looks a little perplexed, I'll translate. Mayor Thorin spends most of his time in the jakes these days, yanking his willy-pink and dreaming his fist is Susan Delgado's box. I'm betting that when the shell's finally opened and her pearl lies before him, he'll never pluck it—his heart'll explode from excitement, and he'll drop dead atop her, so he will. Yar!"

More donkey laughter from Depape. He elbowed Reynolds. "He's got it down, don't he, Clay? Sounds just like em!"

Reynolds grinned, but his eyes were still worried. Rimer managed a smile as thin as a scum of November ice, and pointed at the seven which had just popped out of the pack. "Red on black, my dear Jonas."

"I ain't your dear anything," Jonas said, putting the seven of dia-monds on an eight of shadows, "and you'd do well to remember that." Then, to Reynolds and Depape: "Now what do you boys want? Rimer 'n me was just going to have us a little palaver."

"Perhaps we could *all* put our heads together," Reynolds said, putting a hand on the back of a chair. "Kind of see if our thinking matches up."

"I think not," Jonas said, sweeping his cards together. He looked irri-tated, and

Clay Reynolds took his hand off the back of the chair in a hurry. "Say your say and be done with it. It's late."

"We was thinking it's time to go on out there to the Bar K," Depape said. "Have a look around. See if there's anything to back up what the old fella in Ritzy said."

"And see what else they've got out there," Reynolds put in. "It's getting close now, Eldred, and we can't afford to take chances. They might have—"

"Aye? Guns? Electric lights? Fairy-women in bottles? Who knows? I'll think about it. Clay."

"But—"

"I said I'll think about it. Now go on upstairs, the both of you, back to your own fairy-women."

Reynolds and Depape looked at him, looked at each other, then backed away from the table. Rimer watched them with his thin smile.

At the foot of the stairs, Reynolds turned back. Jonas paused in the act of shuffling his cards and looked at him, tufted eyebrows raised.

"We underestimated em once and they made us look like monkeys. I don't want it to happen again. That's all."

"Your ass is still sore over that, isn't it? Well, so is mine. And I tell you again, they'll pay for what they did. I have the bill ready, and when the time comes, I'll present it to them, with all interest duly noted. In the meantime, they aren't going to spook me into making the first move. Time is on *our* side, not theirs. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"Will you try to remember it?"

"Yes," Reynolds repeated. He seemed satisfied.

"Roy? Do you trust me?"

"Aye, Eldred. To the end." Jonas had praised him for the work he had done in Ritzy, and Depape had rolled in it the way a male dog rolls in the scent of a bitch.

"Then go on up, the both of you, and let me palaver with the boss and be done with it. I'm too old for these late nights."

When they were gone, Jonas dealt out a fresh line of cards, then looked around the room. There were perhaps a dozen folks, including Sheb the piano-player and Barkie the bouncer, sleeping it off. No one was close enough to listen to the low-voiced conversation of the two men by the door, even if one of the snoring

drunkards was for some reason only shamming sleep. Jonas put a red queen on a black knight, then looked up at Rimer. "Say your say."

"Those two said it for me, actually. Sai Depape will never be embar-rassed by a surplus of brains, but Reynolds is fairly smart for a gunny, isn't he?"

"Clay's trig when the moon's right and he's had a shave," Jonas agreed. "Are you saying you came all the way from Seafront to tell me those three babbies need a closer looking at?"

Rimer shrugged.

"Perhaps they do, and I'm the man to do it, if so—right enough. But what's there to find?"

"That's to be seen," Rimer said, and tapped one of Jonas's cards. "There's a Chancellor."

"Aye. Near as ugly as the one I'm sitting with." Jonas put the Chan-cellar—it was Paul—above his run of cards. The next draw uncovered Luke, whom he put next to Paul. That left Peter and Matthew still lurking in the bush. Jonas looked at Rimer shrewdly. "You hide it better than my pals, but you're as nervous as they are, underneath. You want to know what's out at that bunkhouse? I'll tell you: extra boots, pictures of their mummies, socks that stink to high heaven, stiff sheets from boys who've been taught it's low-class to chase after the sheep . . . and guns hidden somewhere. Under the floorboards, like enough."

"You really think they have guns?"

"Aye, Roy got the straight of that, all right. They're from Gilead, they're likely from the line of Eld or from folk who like to think they're from it, and they're likely 'prentices to the trade who've been sent on with guns they haven't earned yet. I wonder a bit about the tall one with the I-don't-give-a-shit look in his eyes—he *might* already be a gunslinger, I suppose—but is it likely? I don't think so. Even if he is, I could take him in a fair go. I know it, and he does, too."

"Then why have they been sent here?"

"Not because those from the Inner Baronies suspect your treason, sai Rimer—be easy on that score."

Rimer's head poked out of his *serape* as he sat up straight, and his face stiffened.

"How dare you call me a traitor? How *dare* you?"

Eldred Jonas favored Hambry's Minister of Inventory with an un-pleasant smile. It made the white-haired man look like a wolverine. "I've called things by their right

names my whole life, and I won't stop now. All that needs matter to you is that I've never double-crossed an employer."

"If I didn't believe in the cause of—"

"To hell with what you believe! It's late and I want to go to bed. The folk in New Canaan and Gilead haven't the foggiest idea of what does or doesn't go on out here on the Crescent; there aren't many of em who've ever been here, I'd wager. Them are too busy trying to keep everything from falling down around their ears to do much travelling these days. No, what they know is all from the picturebooks they was read out of when they 'us babbies themselves: happy cowboys galloping after stock, happy fishermen pulling whoppers into their boats, folks clogging at bam-raisings and drinking big pots o' *graf* in Green Heart pavilion. For the sake of the Man Jesus, Rimer, don't go dense on me—I deal with that day in and day out."

"They see Mejis as a place of quiet and safety."

"Aye, bucolic splendor, just so, no doubt about it. They know that their whole way o' life—all that nobility and chivalry and ancestor-worship—is on fire. The final battle may take place as much as two hundred wheels northwest of their borders, but when Farson uses his fire-carriages and robots to wipe out their army, trouble will come south fast. There are those from the Inner Baronies who've smelled this coming for twenty years or more. They didn't send these brats here to discover your secrets, Rimer; folks such as these don't send their babbies into danger on pur-*pose*. They sent em here to get em out of the way, that's all. That doesn't make em blind or stupid, but for the sake of the gods, let's be sane. They're *kiddies*;

"What else might you find, should you go out there?"

"Some way of sending messages, mayhap. A heliograph's the most likely. And out beyond Eyebolt, a shepherd or maybe a freeholder suscep-tible to a bribe—someone they've trained to catch the message and either flash it on or carry it afoot. But before long it'll be too late for messages to do any good, won't it?"

"Perhaps, but it's not too late yet. And you're right. Kiddies or not, they worry me."

"You've no cause, I tell you. Soon enough, I'll be wealthy and you'll be downright rich. Mayor yourself, if you want. Who'd stand to stop you? Thorin? He's a joke. Coral? She'd help you string him up, I wot. Or per-haps you'd like to be a Baron, if such offices be revived?" He saw a mo-mentary gleam in Rimer's eyes and laughed. Matthew came out of the deck, and Jonas put him up with the other

Chancellors. "Yar, I see that's what you've got your heart set on. Gems is nice, and for gold that goes twice, but there's nothing like having folk bow and scrape before ye, is there?"

Rimer said, "They should have been on the cowboy side by now."

Jonas's hands stopped above the layout of cards. It was a thought that had crossed his own mind more than once, especially over the last two weeks or so.

"How long do you think it takes to count our nets and boats and chart out the fish-hauls?" Rimer asked. "They should be over on the Drop, count-ing cows and horses, looking through barns, studying the foal-charts. They should have been there two weeks ago, in fact. Unless they already know what they'd find."

Jonas understood what Rimer was implying, but couldn't believe it. *Wouldn't* believe it. Not such a depth of slyness from boys who only had to shave once a week.

"No," he said. "That's your own guilty heart talking to you. They're just so determined to do it right that they're creeping along like old folks with bad eyes. They'll be over on the Drop soon enough, and counting their little hearts out."

"And if they're not?"

A good question. Get rid of them somehow, Jonas supposed. An am-bush, perhaps. Three shots from cover, no more babbies. There'd be ill feeling afterward—the boys were well liked in town—but Rimer could handle that until Fair Day, and after the Reap it wouldn't matter. Still—

"I'll have a look around out at the Bar K," Jonas said at last. "By my-self—I won't have Clay and Roy tramping along behind me."

"That sounds fine."

"Perhaps you'd like to come and lend a hand."

Kimba Rimer smiled his icy smile. "I think not."

Jonas nodded, and began to deal again. Going out to the Bar K would be a bit risky, but he didn't expect any real problem—especially if he went alone. They were only *boys*, after all, and gone for much of each day.

"When may I expect a report, sai Jonas?"

"When I'm ready to make it. Don't crowd me."

Rimer lifted his thin hands and held them, palms out, to Jonas. "Cry your pardon, sai," he said.

Jonas nodded, slightly mollified. He flipped up another card. It was Peter,



Chancellor of Keys. He put the card in the top row and then stared at it, combing his fingers through his long white hair as he did. He looked from the card to Rimer, who looked back, eyebrows raised.

"You smile," Rimer said.

"Yar!" Jonas said, and began to deal again. "I'm happy! All the Chan-cellors are out. I think I'm going to win this game."

5

For Rhea, the time of the Huntress had been a time of frustration and unsatisfied craving. Her plans had gone awry, and thanks to her cat's hideously mistimed leap, she didn't know how or why. The young cull who'd taken Susan Delgado's cherry had likely stopped her from chop-ping her scurf. . . but how? And who was he really? She wondered that more and more, but her curiosity was secondary to her fury. Rhea of the Coos wasn't used to being balked.

She looked across the room to where Musty crouched and watched her carefully. Ordinarily he would have relaxed in the fireplace (he seemed to like the cool drafts that swirled down the chimney), but since she had singed his fur. Musty preferred the woodpile. Given Rhea's mood, that was probably wise. "You're lucky I let ye live, ye warlock," the old woman grumbled.

She turned back to the ball and began to make passes above it, but the glass only continued to swirl with bright pink light—not a single image appeared. Rhea got up at last, went to the door, threw it open, and looked out on the night sky. Now the moon had waxed a little past the half, and the Huntress was coming clear on its bright face. Rhea directed the stream of foul language she didn't quite dare to direct at the glass (who knew what entity might lurk inside it, waiting to take offense at such talk?) up at the woman in the moon. Twice she slammed her bony old fist into the door-lintel as she cursed, dredging up every dirty word she could think of, even the potty-mouth words children throw at each other in the dust of the play yard. Never had she been so angry. She had given the girl a com-mand, and the girl, for whatever reasons, had disobeyed. For standing against Rhea of the Coos, the bitch deserved to die.

"But not right away," the old woman whispered. "First she should be rolled in the dirt, then pissed on until the dirt's mud and her fine blonde hair's full of it.

Humiliated ... hurt . . . spat on . . ."

She slammed her fist against the door's side again, and this time blood flew from the knuckles. It wasn't just the girl's failure to obey the hypnotic command. There was another matter, related but much more se-rious: Rhea herself was now too upset to use the glass, except for brief and unpredictable periods of time. The hand-passes she made over it and the incantations she muttered to it were, she knew, useless; the words and gestures were just the way she focused her will. That was what the glass responded to—will and concentrated thought. Now, thanks to the trollop of a girl and her boy lover, Rhea was too angry to summon the smooth concentration needed to part the pink fog which swirled inside the ball. She was, in fact, too angry to see.

"How can I make it like it was?" Rhea asked the half-glimpsed woman in the moon. "Tell me! *Tell me!*" But the Huntress told her noth-ing, and at last Rhea went back inside, sucking at her bleeding knuckles.

Musty saw her coming and squeezed into the cobwebby space be-tween the woodpile and the chimney.

## CHAPTER II

### THE GIRL AT THE WINDOW

#### 1

Now the Huntress "filled her belly," as the old-timers said—even at noon she

could be glimpsed in the sky, a pallid vampire woman caught in bright autumn sunlight. In front of businesses such as the Travellers' Rest and on the porches of such large ranch houses as Lengyll's Rocking B and Renfrew's Lazy Susan, stuffy-guys with heads full of straw above their old overalls began to appear. Each wore his *sombrero*; each held a basket of produce cradled in his arms; each looked out at the emptying world with stitched white-cross eyes.

Wagons filled with squashes clogged the roads; bright orange drifts of pumpkins and bright magenta drifts of sharproot lay against the sides of barns. In the fields, the potato-carts rolled and the pickers followed be-hind. In front of the Hambry Mercantile, reap-charms appeared like magic, hanging from the carved Guardians like wind-chimes.

All over Mejis, girls sewed their Reaping Night costumes (and some-times wept over them, if the work went badly) as they dreamed of the boys they would dance with in the Green Heart pavilion. Their little brothers began to have trouble sleeping as they thought of the rides and the games and the prizes they might win at the carnival. Even their elders sometimes lay awake in spite of their sore hands and aching backs, think-ing about the pleasures of the Reap.

Summer had slipped away with a final flirt of her greengown; harvest-time had arrived.

## 2

Rhea cared not a fig for Reaping dances or carnival games, but she could no more sleep than those who did. Most nights she lay on her stinking pallet until dawn, her skull thudding with rage. On a night not long after Jonas's conversation with Chancellor Rimer, she determined to drink her-self into oblivion. Her mood was not improved when she found that her *graf* barrel was almost empty; she blistered the air with her curses.

She was drawing in breath for a fresh string of them when an idea struck her. A wonderful idea. A *brilliant* idea. She had wanted Susan Delgado to cut off her hair. That hadn't worked, and she didn't know why. . . but she did know *something* about the girl, didn't she? Something inter-esting, aye, so it was, wery interesting, indeed.

Rhea had no desire to go to Thorin with what she knew; she had a fond (and

foolish, likely) hope that the Mayor had forgotten about his wonderful glass ball. But the girl's aunt, now . . . suppose Cordelia Delgado were to discover that not only was her niece's virginity lost, the girl was well on her way to becoming a practiced trollop? Rhea didn't think Cordelia would go to the Mayor, either—the woman was a prig but not a fool—yet it would set the cat among the pigeons just the same, wouldn't it?

"*Waow!*"

Thinking of cats, there was Musty, standing on the stoop in the moon-light, looking at her with a mixture of hope and mistrust. Rhea, grinning hideously, opened her arms. "Come to me, my precious! Come, my sweet one!"

Musty, understanding all was forgiven, rushed into his mistress's arms and began to purr loudly as Rhea licked along his sides with her old and yellowing tongue. That night the Coos slept soundly for the first time in a week, and when she took the glass ball into her arms the following morning, its mists cleared for her at once. She spent the day in thrall to it, spying on people she detested, drinking little and eating nothing. Around sunset, she came out of her trance enough to realize she had as yet done nothing about the saucy little jade. But that was all right; she saw how it *could* be done . . . and she could watch all the results in the glass! All the protests, all the shouting and recriminations! She would see Susan's tears. That would be the best, to see her tears.

"A little harvest of my own," she said to Ermot, who now came slith-ering up her leg toward the place where she liked him best. There weren't many men who could do you like Ermot could do you, no indeed. Sitting there with a lapful of snake, Rhea began to laugh.

### 3

"Remember your promise," Alain said nervously as they heard the ap-proaching beat of Rusher's hoofs. "Keep your temper."

"I will," Cuthbert said, but he had his doubts. As Roland rode around the long wing of the bunkhouse and into the yard, his shadow trailing out in the sunset light, Cuthbert clenched his hands nervously. He willed them to open, and they did. Then, as he watched Roland dismount, they rolled themselves closed again, the nails digging into his palms.

*Another go-round, Cuthbert thought. Gods, but I'm sick of them. Sick to death.* Last night's had been about the pigeons—again. Cuthbert wanted to use one to send a message back west about the oil tankers; Roland still did not. So they had argued. Except (here was another thing which infuriated him, that rubbed against his nerves like the sound of the thimble) Roland did not argue. These days Roland did not *deign* to argue. His eyes always kept that distant look, as if only his body was here. The rest of him—mind, soul, spirit, *ka*—was with Susan Delgado.

"No," he had said simply. "It's too late for such."

"You can't know that," Cuthbert had argued. "And even if it's too late for *help* to come from Gilead, it's not too late for *advice* to come from Gilead. Are you so blind you can't see that?"

"What advice can they send us?" Roland hadn't seemed to hear the rawness in Cuthbert's voice. His own voice was calm. Reasonable. And utterly disconnected, Cuthbert thought, from the urgency of the situation.

"If we knew that," he had replied, "we wouldn't have to ask, Roland, would we?"

"We can only wait and stop them when they make their move. It's comfort you're looking for, Cuthbert, not advice."

*You mean wait while you fuck her in as many ways and in as many places as you can imagine, Cuthbert thought. Inside, outside, rightside up and upside down.*

"You're not thinking clearly about this," Cuthbert had said coldly. He'd heard Alain's gasp. Neither of them had ever said such a thing to Roland in their lives, and once it was out, he'd waited uneasily for what-ever explosion might follow. None did. "Yes," Roland replied, "I am." And he had gone into the bunkhouse without another word.

Now, watching Roland uncinch Rusher's girths and pull the saddle from his back, Cuthbert thought: *You 're not, you know. But you better think clearly about this. By all the gods, you 'd better.*

"Hile," he said as Roland carried the saddle over to the porch and set it on the step. "Busy afternoon?" He felt Alain kick his ankle and ignored it.

"I've been with Susan," Roland said. No defense, no demur, no excuse. And for a moment Cuthbert had a vision of shocking clarity: he saw the two of them in a hut somewhere, the late afternoon sun shining through holes in the roof and dappling their bodies. She was on top, riding him. Cuthbert saw her knees on the old, spongy boards, and the tension in her long thighs. He saw how tanned her arms

were, how white her belly. He saw how Roland's hands cupped the globes of her breasts, squeezing them as she rocked back and forth above him, and he saw how the sun lit her hair, turning it into a fine-spun net.

*Why do you always have to be first?* he cried at Roland in his mind. *Why does it always have to be you? Gods damn you, Roland! Gods damn you!*

"We were on the docks," Cuthbert said, his tone a thin imitation of his usual brightness. "Counting boots and marine tools and what are called clam-drags. What an amusing time of it we've had, eh, Al?"

"Did you need me to help you do that?" Roland asked. He went back to Rusher, and took off the saddle-blanket. "Is that why you sound angry?"

"If I sound angry, it's because most of the fishermen are laughing at us behind our backs. We keep coming back and coming back. Roland, they think we're fools." Roland nodded. "All to the good," he said.

"Perhaps," Alain said quietly, "but Rimer doesn't think we're fools—it's in the way he looks at us when we pass. Nor does Jonas. And if they don't think we're fools, Roland, what *do* they think?"

Roland stood on the second step, the saddle-blanket hanging forgot-ten over his arm. For once they actually seemed to have his attention, Cuthbert thought. Glory be and will wonders never cease.

"They think we're avoiding the Drop because we already know what's there," Roland said. "And if they don't think it, they soon will."

"Cuthbert has a plan."

Roland's gaze—mild, interested, already starting to be not there again—shifted to Cuthbert. Cuthbert the joker. Cuthbert the 'prentice, who had in no way earned the gun he'd carried east to the Outer Crescent. Cuthbert the virgin and eternal second. *Gods, I don't want to hate him. I don't, but now it's so easy.*

"We two should go and see Sheriff Avery tomorrow," Cuthbert said. "We will present it as a courtesy visit. We have already established our-selves as three courteous, if slightly stupid, young fellows, have we not?"

"To a fault," Roland agreed, smiling.

"We'll say that we've finally finished with the seacoast side of Hambry, and we hope to be every bit as meticulous on the farm and cowboy side. But we certainly don't want to cause trouble or be in anyone's way. It is, after all, the busiest time of year—for ranchers as well as farmers— and even citified fools such as ourselves

will be aware of that. So we'll give the good Sheriff a list—"

Roland's eyes lit up. He tossed the blanket over the porch rail, grabbed Cuthbert around the shoulders, and gave him a rough hug. Cuthbert could smell a lilac scent around Roland's collar and felt an insane but powerful urge to clamp his hands around Roland's throat and try to strangle him. Instead, he gave him a perfunctory clap on the back in return.

Roland drew away, grinning widely. "A list of the ranches we'll be visiting," he said. "Aye! And with forewarning, they can move any stock they'd like us not to see on to the next ranch, or the last one. The same for tack, feed, equipment. . . it's masterful, Cuthbert! You're a genius!"

"Far from that," Cuthbert said. "I've just spared a little time to think about a problem that concerns us all. That concerns the entire Affiliation, mayhap. We *need* to think. Wouldn't you say?"

Alain winced, but Roland didn't seem to notice. He was still grinning. Even at fourteen, such an expression on his face was troubling. The truth was that when Roland grinned, he looked slightly mad. "Do you know, they may even move in a fair number of muties for us to look at, just so we'll continue to believe the lies they've already told about the impurity of their stocklines." He paused, seeming to think, and then said: "Why don't you and Alain go and see the Sheriff, Bert? That would do very well, I think."

At this point Cuthbert nearly threw himself at Roland, wanting to scream *Yes, why not? Then you could spend tomorrow morning pronging her as well as tomorrow afternoon! You idiot! You thoughtless lovestruck idiot!*

It was Al who saved him—saved them all, perhaps.

"Don't be a fool," he said sharply, and Roland wheeled toward him, looking surprised. He wasn't used to sharpness from that quarter. "You're our leader, Roland—seen that way by Thorin, by Avery, by the towns-folk. Seen that way by us as well."

"No one appointed me—"

"No one needed to!" Cuthbert shouted. "You won your guns! These folk would hardly believe it—I hardly believe it myself just lately—but *you are a gunslinger*. You have to go! Plain as the nose on your face! It doesn't matter which of us accompanies you, but you have to go!" He could say more, much more, but if he did, where would it end? With their fellowship broken beyond repair, likely. So he

clamped his mouth shut— no need for Alain to kick him this time—and once again waited for the explosion. Once again, none came.

"All right," Roland said in his new way—that mild it-doesn't-much-matter way that made Cuthbert feel like biting him to wake him up. "To-morrow morning. You and I, Bert. Will eight suit you?"

"Down to the ground," Cuthbert said. Now that the discussion was over and the decision made, Bert's heart was beating wildly and the muscles in his upper thighs felt like rubber. It was the way he'd felt after their confrontation with the Big Coffin Hunters.

"We'll be at our prettiest," Roland said. "Nice boys from the Inners with good intentions but not many brains. Fine." And he went inside, no longer grinning (which was a relief) but smiling gently.

Cuthbert and Alain looked at each other and let out their breath in a mutual rush. Cuthbert cocked his head toward the yard, and went down the steps. Alain followed, and the two boys stood in the center of the dirt rectangle with the bunkhouse at their backs. To the east, the rising full moon was hidden behind a scrim of clouds.

"She's tranced him," Cuthbert said. "Whether she means to or not, she'll kill us all in the end. Wait and see if she don't."

"You shouldn't say such, even in jest."

"All right, she'll crown us with the jewels of Eld and we'll live forever."

"You have to stop being angry at him, Bert. You *have* to."

Cuthbert looked at him bleakly. "I can't."

4

The great storms of autumn were still a month or more distant, but the following morning dawned drizzly and gray. Roland and Cuthbert wrapped themselves in *scrapes* and headed for town, leaving Alain to the few home place chores. Tucked in Roland's belt was the schedule of farms and ranches—beginning with the three small spreads owned by the Barony—the three of them had worked out the previous evening. The pace this schedule suggested was almost ludicrously slow—it would keep them on the Drop and in the orchards almost until Year's End Fair—but it conformed to the pace they had already set on the docks.



Now the two of them rode silently toward town, both lost in their own thoughts. Their way took them past the Delgado house. Roland looked up and saw Susan sitting in her window, a bright vision in the gray light of that fall morning. His heart leaped up and although he didn't know it then, it was how he would remember her most clearly forever after—lovely Su-san, the girl at the window. So do we pass the ghosts that haunt us later in our lives; they sit undramatically by the roadside like poor beggars, and we see them only from the comers of our eyes, if we see them at all. The idea that they have been waiting there for us rarely if ever crosses our minds. Yet they do wait, and when we have passed, they gather up their bundles of memory and fall in behind, treading in our footsteps and catch-ing up, little by little.

Roland raised a hand to her. It went toward his mouth at first, wanting to send her a kiss, but that would be madness. He lifted the hand before it could touch his lips and ticked a finger off his forehead instead, offering a saucy little salute.

Susan smiled and returned it in kind. None saw Cordelia, who had gone out in the drizzle to check on the last of her squash and sharproot. That lady stood where she was, a *sombrero* yanked down on her head al-most to the eyeline, half-hidden by the stuffy-guy guarding the pumpkin patch. She watched Roland and Cuthbert pass (Cuthbert she barely saw; her interest was in the other one). From the boy on horseback she looked up to Susan, sitting there in her window, humming as blithely as a bird in a gilded cage.

A sharp splinter of suspicion whispered its way into Cordelia's heart. Susan's change of temperament—from alternating bouts of sorrow and fearful anger to a kind of dazed but mainly cheerful acceptance—had been so sudden. Mayhap it wasn't acceptance at all.

"Ye're mad," she whispered to herself, but her hand remained tight on the haft of the machete she held. She dropped to her knees in the muddy garden and abruptly began chopping sharproot vines, tossing the roots themselves toward the side of the house with quick, accurate throws. "There's nothing between em. I'd know. Children of such an age have no more discretion than . . . than the drunks in the Rest."

But the way they had smiled. The way they had smiled at *each other*.

"Perfectly normal," she whispered, chopping and throwing. She cut a sharproot nearly in half, ruining it, not noticing. The whispering was a habit she'd picked up

only recently, as Reap Day neared and the stresses of coping with her brother's troublesome daughter mounted. "Folks smile at each other, that's all."

The same for the salute and Susan's returning wave. Below, the hand-some cavalier, acknowledging the pretty maid; above, the maid herself, pleased to be acknowledged by such as he. It was youth calling to youth, that was all. And yet... *The look in his eyes . . . and the look in hers.*

Nonsense, of course. But—

*But you saw something else.*

Yes, perhaps. For a moment it had seemed to her that the young man was going to blow Susan a kiss . . . then had remembered himself at the last moment and turned it into a salute, instead.

*Even if ye did see such a thing, it means nothing. Young cavaliers are saucy, especially when out from beneath the gaze of their fathers. And these three already have a history, as ye well know.*

All true enough, but none of it removed that chilly splinter from her heart.

## 5

Jonas answered Roland's knock and let the two boys into the Sheriff's of-lice. He was wearing a Deputy's star on his shirt, and looked at them with expressionless eyes. "Boys," he said. "Come in out of the wet."

He stepped back to allow them entrance. His limp was more pro-nounced than Roland had ever seen it; the wet weather was playing it up, he supposed.

Roland and Cuthbert stepped in. There was a gas heater in the cor-ner—tilled from "the candle" at Citgo, no doubt—and the big room, which had been cool on the day they had first come here, was stuporously hot. The three cells held five woeful-looking drunks, two pairs of men and a woman in the center cell by herself, sitting on the bunk with her legs spread wide, displaying a broad expanse of red drawers. Roland feared that if she got her finger any farther up her nose, she might never retrieve it. Clay Reynolds was leaning against the notice-board, picking his teeth with a broomstraw. Sitting at the rolltop desk was Deputy Dave, stroking his chin and frowning through his monocle at the board which had been set up there. Roland wasn't at all surprised to see that he and Bert had in-terrupted a game of Castles.

"Well, look here, Eldred!" Reynolds said. "It's two of the In-World boys! Do your mummies know you're out, fellas?"

"They do," Cuthbert said brightly. "And you're looking very well, sai Reynolds. The wet weather's soothed your pox, has it?"

Without looking at Bert or losing his pleasant little smile, Roland shot an elbow into his friend's shoulder. "Pardon my friend, sai. His humor regularly transgresses the bounds of good taste; he doesn't seem able to help it. There's no need for us to scratch at one another—we've agreed to let bygones be bygones, haven't we?"

"Aye, certainly, all a misunderstanding," Jonas said. He limped back across to the desk and the game-board. As he sat down on his side of it, his smile turned to a sour little grimace. "I'm worse than an old dog," he said. "Someone ought to put me down, so they should. Earth's cold but painless, eh, boys?"

He looked back at the board and moved a man around to the side of his Hillock. He had begun to Castle, and was thus vulnerable . . . although not very, in this case, Roland thought; Deputy Dave didn't look like much in the way of competition.

"I see you're working for the Barony salt now," Roland said, nodding at the star on Jonas's shirt.

"Salt's what it amounts to," Jonas said, companionably enough. "A fellow went leg-broke. I'm helping out, that's all."

"And sai Reynolds? Sai Depape? Are they helping out as well?"

"Yar, I reckon," Jonas said. "How goes your work among the fisher-folk? Slow, I hear."

"Done at last. The work wasn't so slow as we were. But coming here in disgrace was enough for us—we have no intention of leaving that way. Slow and steady wins the race, they say."

"So they do," Jonas agreed. "Whoever 'they' are."

From somewhere deeper in the building there came the whoosh of a water-stool flushing. *All the comforts of home in the Hambry Sheriff's*, Roland thought. The flush was soon followed by heavy footsteps de-scending a staircase, and a few moments later, Herk Avery appeared. With one hand he was buckling his belt; with the other he mopped his broad and sweaty forehead. Roland admired the man's dexterity.

"Whew!" the Sheriff exclaimed. "Them beans I ate last night took the shortcut, I

tell ye." He looked from Roland to Cuthbert and then back to Roland. "Why, boys! Too wet for net-counting, is it?"

"Sai Dearborn was just saying that their net-counting days are at an end," Jonas said. He combed back his long hair with the tips of his fingers. Beyond him, Clay Reynolds had resumed his slouch against the notice-board, looking at Roland and Cuthbert with open dislike.

"Aye? Well, that's fine, that's fine. What's next, youngsters? And is there any way we here can help ye? For that's what we like to do best, lend a hand where a hand's needed. So it is."

"Actually, you *could* help us," Roland said. He reached into his belt and pulled out the list. "We have to move on to the Drop, but we don't want to inconvenience anyone."

Grinning hugely, Deputy Dave slid his Squire all the way around his own Hillock. Jonas Castled at once, ripping open Dave's entire left flank. The grin faded from Dave's face, leaving a puzzled emptiness. "How'd ye manage that?"

"Easy." Jonas smiled, then pushed back from the desk to include the others in his regard. "You want to remember, Dave, that I play to win. I can't help it; it's just my nature." He turned his full attention to Roland. His smile broadened. "Like the scorpion said to the maiden as she lay dy-ing, 'You knowed I was poison when you picked me up.' "

## 6

When Susan came in from feeding the livestock, she went directly to the cold-pantry for the juice, which was her habit. She didn't see her aunt standing in the chimney comer and watching her, and when Cordelia spoke, Susan was startled badly. It wasn't just the unexpectedness of the voice; it was the coldness of it.

"Do ye know him?"

The juice-jug slipped in her fingers, and Susan put a steadying hand beneath it. Orange juice was too precious to waste, especially this late in the year. She turned and saw her aunt by the woodbox. Cordelia had hung her *sombrero* on a hook in the entryway, but she still wore her *serape* and muddy boots. Her *cuchillo* lay on top of the stacked wood, with green strands of sharproot vine still trailing from its edge. Her tone was cold, but her eyes were hot with suspicion.

A sudden clarity filled Susan's mind and all of her senses. *If you say "No, " you're damned,* she thought. *If you even ask who, you may be damned. You must say—*"I know them both," she replied in offhand fashion. "I met them at the party. So did you. Ye frightened me, Aunt."

"Why did he salute ye so?"

"How can I know? Perhaps he just felt like it."

Her aunt bolted forward, slipped in her muddy boots, regained her balance, and seized Susan by the arms. Now her eyes were blazing. "Be'n't insolent with me, girl! Be'n't haughty with me, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty, or I'll—"

Susan pulled backward so hard that Cordelia staggered and might have fallen again, if the table had not been handy to grab. Behind her, muddy foot-tracks stood out on the clean kitchen floor like accusations. "Call me that again and I'll . . . I'll slap thee!" Susan cried. "So I will!"

Cordelia's lips drew back from her teeth in a dry, ferocious smile. "Ye'd slap your father's only living blood kin? Would ye be so bad?"

"Why not? Do ye not slap me, Aunt?"

Some of the heat went out of her aunt's eyes, and the smile left her mouth. "Susan! Hardly ever! Not half a dozen times since ye were a toddler who would grab anything her hands could reach, even a pot of boiling water on the—"

"It's with thy mouth thee mostly hits nowadays," Susan said. "I've put up with it—more fool me—but am done with it now. I'll have no more. If I'm old enough to be sent to a man's bed for money, I'm old enough for ye to keep a civil tongue when ye speak to me."

Cordelia opened her mouth to defend herself—the girl's anger had startled her, and so had her accusations—and then she realized how cleverly she was being led away from the subject of the boys. Of the *boy*.

"Ye only know him from the party, Susan? It's Dearborn I mean." *As I think ye well know.*

"I've seen him about town," Susan said. She met her aunt's eyes steadily, although it cost her an effort; lies would follow half-truths as dark followed dusk. "I've seen all three of them about town. Are ye satisfied?" No, Susan saw with mounting dismay, she was not. "Do ye swear to me, Susan—on your father's name—that ye've not been meeting this boy Dearborn?"

*All the rides in the late afternoon, Susan thought. All the excuses. All the care that*

*no one should see us. And it all comes down to a careless wave on a rainy morning. That easily all's put at risk. Did we think it could be otherwise? Were we that foolish?*

Yes ... and no. The truth was they had been mad. And still were. Susan kept remembering the look of her father's eyes on the few occasions when he had caught her in a fib. That look of half-curious disappointment. The sense that her fibs, innocuous as they might be, had hurt him like the scratch of a thorn.

"I will swear to nothing," she said. "Ye've no right to ask it of me." "Swear!" Cordelia cried shrilly. She groped out for the table again and grasped it, as if for balance. "Swear it! Swear it! This is no game of jacks or tag or Johnny-jump-my-pony! Thee's not a child any longer! Swear to me! Swear that thee're still pure!"

"No," Susan said, and turned to leave. Her heart was beating madly, but still that awful clarity informed the world. Roland would have known it for what it was: she was seeing with gunslinger's eyes. There was a glass window in the kitchen, looking out toward the Drop, and in it she saw the ghostly reflection of Aunt Cord coming toward her, one arm raised, the hand at the end of it knotted into a fist.

Without turning, Susan put up her own hand in a halting gesture. "Raise that not to me," she said. "Raise it not, ye bitch."

She saw the reflection's ghost-eyes widen in shock and dismay. She saw the ghost-fist relax, become a hand again, fall to the ghost-woman's side.

"Susan," Cordelia said in a small, hurt voice. "How can ye call me so? What's so coarsened your tongue and your regard for me?"

Susan went out without replying. She crossed the yard and entered the bam. Here the smells she had known since childhood—horses, lumber, hay—filled her head and drove the awful clarity away. She was tumbled back into childhood, lost in the shadows of her confusion again. Pylon turned to look at her and whickered. Susan put her head against his neck and cried.

"There!" Sheriff Avery said when sais Dearborn and Heath were gone. "It's as ye said—just slow is all they are; just creeping careful." He held the meticulously printed list up, studied it a moment, then cackled happily. "And look at this! What a beauty! Har! We can move anything we don't want em to see days in advance, so

we can."

"They're fools," Reynolds said . . . but he pined for another chance at them, just the same. If Dearborn really thought bygones were bygones over that little business in the Travellers' Rest, he was way past foolish-ness and dwelling in the land of idiocy.

Deputy Dave said nothing. He was looking disconsolately through his monocle at the Castles board, where his white army had been laid waste in six quick moves. Jonas's forces had poured around Red Hillock like water, and Dave's hopes had been swept away in the flood.

"I'm tempted to wrap myself up dry and go over to Seafront with this," Avery said. He was still gloating over the paper, with its neat list of farms and ranches and proposed dates of inspection. Up to Year's End and beyond it ran. Gods!

"Why don't ye do that?" Jonas said, and got to his feet. Pain ran up his leg like bitter lightning.

"Another game, sai Jonas?" Dave asked, beginning to reset the pieces.

"I'd rather play a weed-eating dog," Jonas said, and took malicious pleasure at the flush that crept up Dave's neck and stained his guileless fool's face. He limped across to the door, opened it, and went out on the porch. The drizzle had become a soft, steady rain. Hill Street was de-serted, the cobbles gleaming wetly.

Reynolds had followed him out. "Eldred—"

"Get away," Jonas said without turning.

Clay hesitated a moment, then went back inside and closed the door.

*What the hell's wrong with you?* Jonas asked himself.

He should have been pleased at the two young pups and their list—as pleased as Avery was, as pleased as Rimer would be when he heard about this morning's visit. After all, hadn't he told Rimer not three days ago that the boys would soon be over on the Drop, counting their little hearts out? Yes. So why did he feel so unsettled? So fucking jittery? Because there ^Bt still hadn't been any contact from Parson's man, Latigo? Because Rey-nolds came back empty from Hanging Rock on one day and Depape came back empty the next? Surely not. Latigo would come, along with a goodly troop of men, but it was still too soon for them, and Jonas knew it. Reap-ing was still almost a month away.

*So is it just the bad weather working on your leg, stirring up that old wound and making you ugly?*

No. The pain was bad, but it had been worse before. The trouble was his head. Jonas leaned against a post beneath the overhang, listened to the rain plinking on the tiles, and thought how, sometimes in a game of Castles, a clever player would peek around his Hillock for just a moment, then duck back. That was what this felt like—it was so right it smelled wrong. Crazy idea, but somehow not crazy at all. "Are you trying to play Castles with me, sprat?" Jonas murmured. "If so, you'll soon wish you'd stayed home with your mommy. So you will."

8

Roland and Cuthbert headed back to the Bar K along the Drop—there would be no counting done today. At first, in spite of the rain and the gray skies, Cuthbert's good humor was almost entirely restored.

"Did you see them?" he asked with a laugh. "Did you see them, Roland . . . Will, I mean? They bought it, didn't they? Swallowed that honey whole, they did!"

"Yes."

"What do we do next? What's our next move?"

Roland looked at him blankly for a moment, as if startled out of a doze. "The next move is theirs. We count. And we wait."

Cuthbert's good cheer collapsed in a puff, and he once more found himself having to restrain a flood of recrimination, all whirling around two basic ideas: that Roland was shirking his duty so he could continue to wallow in the undeniable charms of a certain young lady, and—more important—that Roland had lost his wits when all of Mid-World needed them the most.

Except what duty was Roland shirking? And what made him so sure Roland was wrong? Logic? Intuition? Or just shitty old catbox jealousy? Cuthbert found himself thinking of the effortless way Jonas had ripped up Deputy Dave's army when Deputy Dave had moved too soon. But life was not like Castles ... was it? He didn't know. But he thought he had at least one valid intuition: Roland was heading for disaster. And so they all were.

*Wake up, Cuthbert thought. Please, Roland, wake up before it's too late.*





CHAPTER III  
playing castles

There followed a week of the sort of weather that makes folk apt to crawl back into bed after lunch, take long naps, and wake feeling stupid and dis-oriented. It was far from flood-weather, but it made the final phase of the apple-picking dangerous (there were several broken legs, and in Seven-Mile Orchard a young woman fell from the top of her ladder, breaking her back), and the potato-fields became difficult to work; almost as much time was spent freeing wagons stuck in the gluey rows as was spent actually picking. In Green Heart, what decorations had been done for the Reaping Fair grew sodden and had to be pulled down. The work volunteers waited with increasing nervousness for the weather to break so they could begin again.

It was bad weather for young men whose job it was to take inventory, although they were at least able to begin visiting barns and counting stock. It was good weather for a young man and young woman who had discovered the joys of physical love, you would have said, but Roland and Susan met only twice during the run of gray weather. The danger of what they were doing was now almost palpable.

The first time was in an abandoned boathouse on the Seacoast Road. The second was in the far end of the crumbling building below and to the east of Citgo—they made love with furious intensity on one of Roland's saddle-blankets, which was spread on the floor of what had once been the oil refinery's cafeteria. As Susan climaxed, she shrieked his name over and over. Startled pigeons filled the old, shadowy rooms and crumbling hallways with their soft thunder.

Just as it seemed that the drizzle would never end and the grinding sound of the thinny in the still air would drive everyone in Hambry insane, a strong wind—almost a gale—blew in off the ocean and puffed the clouds away. The town awoke one day to a sky as bright as blue steel and a sun that turned the bay to gold in the morning and white fire in the afternoon. That sense of lethargy was gone. In the potato fields the carts rolled with new vigor. In Green Heart an army of women began once more to bedeck with flowers the podium where Jamie

McCann and Susan Delgado would be acclaimed this year's Reaping Lad and Girl. Out on the part of the Drop closest to Mayor's House, Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain rode with renewed purpose, counting the horses which ran with the Barony brand on their flanks. The bright skies and brisk winds filled them with energy and good cheer, and for a course of days—three, or perhaps four—they galloped together in a whooping, shouting, laughing line, their old good fellowship restored.

On one of these brisk and sunny days, Eldred Jonas stepped out of the Sheriff's office and walked up Hill Street toward Green Heart. He was free of both Depape and Reynolds this morning—they had ridden out to Hanging Rock together, looking for Latigo's outriders, who must come soon, now—and Jonas's plan was simple: to have a glass of beer in the pavilion, and watch the preparations that were going on there: the digging of the roasting-pits, the laying of faggots for the bonfire, the arguments over how to set the mortars that would shoot off the fireworks, the ladies flowering the stage where this year's Lad and Girl would be offered for the town's adulation. Perhaps, Jonas thought, he might take a likely-looking flower-girl off for an hour or two of recreation. The maintenance of the saloon whores he left strictly to Roy and Clay, but a fresh young flower-girl of seventeen or so was a different matter.

The pain in his hip had faded with the damp weather; the painful, lurching stride with which he had moved for the last week or so had become a mere limp again. Perhaps just a beer or two in the open air would be enough, but the thought of a girl wouldn't quite leave his head. Young, clear-skinned, high-breasted. Fresh, sweet breath. Fresh, sweet lips—

"Mr. Jonas? Eldred?"

He turned, smiling, to the owner of the voice. No dewy-complexioned flower-girl with wide eyes and moist, parted lips stood there, but a skinny woman edging into late middle age—flat chest, flat bum, tight pale lips, hair scooped so tight against her skull that it fair screamed. Only the wide eyes corresponded with his daydream. *I believe I've made a conquest*, Jonas thought sardonically.

"Why, Cordelia!" he said, reaching out and taking one of her hands in both of his. "How lovely you look this morning!"

Thin color came up in her cheeks and she laughed a little. For a moment she looked forty-five instead of sixty. *And she's not sixty*, Jonas thought. *The lines around her mouth and the shadows under her eyes . . . those are new.*

"You're very kind," she said, "but I know better. I haven't been sleeping, and when women my age don't sleep, they grow old rapidly."

"I'm sorry to hear you're sleeping badly," he said. "But now that the weather's changed, perhaps—"

"It's not the weather. Might I speak to you, Eldred? I've thought and thought, and you're the only one I dare turn to for advice."

His smile widened. He placed her hand through his arm, then covered it with his own. Now her blush was like fire. With all that blood in her head, she might talk for hours. And Jonas had an idea that every word would be interesting.

### 3

With women of a certain age and temperament, tea was more effective than wine when it came to loosening the tongue. Jonas gave up his plans for a lager (and, perhaps, a flower-girl) without so much as a second thought. He seated sai Delgado in a sunny corner of the Green Heart pavilion (it was not far from a red rock Roland and Susan knew well), and ordered a large pot of tea; cakes, too. They watched the Reaping Fair preparations go forward as they waited for the food and drink. The sunswept park was full of hammering and sawing and shouts and bursts of laughter.

"All Fair-Days are pleasant, but Reaping turns us all into children again, don't you find?" Cordelia asked.

"Yes, indeed," said Jonas, who hadn't felt like a child even when he had been one.

"What I still like best is the bonfire," she said, looking toward the great pile of sticks and boards that was being constructed at the far end of the park, easter-corner from the stage. It looked like a large wooden tepee. "I love it when the townsfolk bring their stuffy-guys and throw them on. Barbaric, but it always gives me *such* a pleasant shiver."

"Aye," Jonas said, and wondered if it would give her a pleasant shiver to know that three of the stuffy-guys thrown onto the Reap Night bonfire this year were apt to smell like pork and scream like harpies as they burned. If his luck was in, the one that screamed the longest would be the one with the pale blue eyes.

The tea and cakes came, and Jonas didn't so much as glance at the girl's full bosom when she bent to serve. He had eyes only for the fascinating sai Delgado, with her

nervous little shifting movements and odd, desperate look.

When the girl was gone, he poured out, put the teapot back on its trivet, then covered her hand with his. "Now, Cordelia," he said in his warmest tone. "I can see something troubles you. Out with it. Confide in your friend Eldred."

Her lips pressed so tightly together that they almost disappeared, but not even that effort could stop their trembling. Her eyes filled with tears; swam with them; overflowed. He took his napkin and, leaning across the table, wiped the tears away.

"Tell me," he said tenderly.

"I will. I must tell somebody or go mad. But you must make one promise, Eldred."

"Of course, molly." He saw her blush more furiously than ever at this harmless endearment, and squeezed her hand. "Anything."

"You mustn't tell Hart. That disgusting spider of a Chancellor, either, but especially not the Mayor. If I'm right in what I suspect and he found out, he could send her west!" She almost moaned this, as if comprehending it as a real fact for the first time. "He could send us *both* west!"

Maintaining his sympathetic smile, he said: "Not a word to Mayor Thorin, not a word to Kimba Rimer. Promise."

For a moment he thought that she wouldn't take the plunge ... or perhaps couldn't. Then, in a low, gasping voice that sounded like ripping cloth, she said a single word. "Dearborn."

He felt his heart take a bump as the name that had been so much in his mind now passed her lips, and although he continued to smile, he could not forbear a single hard squeeze of her fingers that made her wince.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just that you startled me a little. Dearborn ... a well-spoken enough lad, but I wonder if he's entirely trustworthy."

"I fear he's been with my Susan." Now it was her turn to squeeze, but Jonas didn't mind. He hardly felt it, in fact. He continued to smile, hoping he did not look as flabbergasted as he felt. "I fear he's been with her... as a man is with a woman. Oh, how horrible this is!"

She wept with a silent bitterness, taking little pecking peeks around as she did to make sure they were not being observed. Jonas had seen coyotes and wild dogs look around from their stinking dinners in just that fashion. He let her get as much of it out of her system as he could—he wanted her calm; incoherencies wouldn't

help him—and when he saw her tears slackening, he held out a cup of tea. "Drink this."

"Yes. Thank you." The tea was still hot enough to steam, but she drank it down greedily. *Her old throat must be lined with slate*, Jonas thought. She set the cup down, and while he poured out fresh, she used her frilly *pañuelo* to scrub the tears almost viciously from her face.

"I don't like him," she said. "Don't like him, don't trust him, none of those three with their fancy In-World bows and insolent eyes and strange ways of talking, but him in particular. Yet if anything's gone on betwixt the two of em (and I'm so afraid it has), it comes back to her, doesn't it? It's the woman, after all, who must refuse the bestial impulses."

He leaned over the table, looking at her with warm sympathy. "Tell me everything, Cordelia."

She did.

#### 4

Rhea loved everything about the glass ball, but what she especially loved was the way it unfailingly showed her people at their vilest. Never in its pink reaches did she see one child comforting another after a fall at play, or a tired husband with his head in his wife's lap, or old people supping peacefully together at the end of the day; these things held no more inter-est for the glass, it seemed, than they did for her.

Instead she had seen acts of incest, mothers beating children, hus-bands beating wives. She had seen a gang of boys out west'rds of town (it would have amused Rhea to know these swaggering eight-year-olds called themselves the Big Coffin Hunters) go about enticing stray dogs with a bone and then cutting off their tails for a lark. She had seen rob-beries, and at least one murder: a wandering man who had stabbed his companion with a pitchfork after some sort of trivial argument. That had been on the first drizzly night. The body still lay mouldering in a ditch be-side the Great Road West, covered with a layer of straw and weeds. It might be discovered before the autumn storms came to drown another year; it might not. She also glimpsed Cordelia Delgado and that hard gun, Jonas, sitting in Green Heart at one of the outside tables and talking about . . . well, of course she didn't

know, did she? But she could see the look in the spinster bitch's eyes. Infatuated with him, she was, all pink in the face. Gone all hot and sweet over a backshooter and failed gunslinger. It was comical, aye, and Rhea thought she would keep an eye on them, from time to time. Wery entertaining, it would likely be. After showing her Cordelia and Jonas, the glass veiled itself once more. Rhea put it back in the box with the eye on the lock. Seeing Cordelia in the glass had reminded the old woman that she had unfinished business regarding Cordelia's sluttish niece. That Rhea still hadn't done that business was ironic but understandable—as soon as she had seen how to fix the young sai's wagon, Rhea's mind and emotions had settled again, the images in the ball had reappeared, and in her fascination with them Rhea had temporarily forgotten that Susan Delgado was alive. Now, how-ever, she remembered her plan. Set the cat among the pigeons. And speak-ing of cats—

"Musty! Yoo-hoo, Musty, where are ye?"

The cat came oiling out of the woodpile, eyes glowing in the dirty dimness of the hut (when the weather turned fine again, Rhea had pulled her shutters to), forked tail waving. He jumped into her lap.

"I've an errand for ye," she said, bending over to lick the cat. The en-trancing taste of Musty's fur filled her mouth and throat.

Musty purred and arched his back against her lips. For a six-legged mutie cat, life was good.

## 5

Jonas got rid of Cordelia as soon as he could—although not as soon as he would have liked, because he had to keep the scrawny bint sweetened up. She might come in handy another time. In the end he had kissed her on the comer of her mouth (which caused her to turn so violently red he feared she might have a brain-storm) and told her that he would check into the matter which so concerned her. "But discreetly!" she said, alarmed.

Yes, he said, walking her home, he would be discreet; discretion was his middle name. He knew Cordelia wouldn't—*couldn't*—be eased until she knew for sure, but he guessed it would turn out to be nothing but va-por. Teenagers loved to dramatize, didn't they? And if the young lass saw that her aunt was afraid of

something, she might well feed auntie's fears instead of allaying them.

Cordelia had stopped by the white picket fence that divided her garden-plot from the road, an expression of sublime relief coming over her face. Jonas thought she looked like a mule having its back scratched with a stiff brush.

"Why, I never thought of that... yet it's likely, isn't it?"

"Likely enough," Jonas had said, "but I'll still check into it most care-fully. Better safe than sorry." He kissed the corner of her mouth again. "And not a word to the fellows at Seafront. Not a hint."

"Thank'ee, Eldred! Oh, thank'ee!" And she had hugged him before hurrying in, her tiny breasts pressing like stones against the front of his shirt. "Mayhap I'll sleep tonight, after all!"

*She* might, but Jonas wondered if he would.

He walked toward Hockey's stable, where he kept his horse, with his head down and his hands locked behind his back. A gaggle of boys came racing up the other side of the street; two of them were waving severed dog's tails with blood clotted at the ends.

"Coffin Hunters! We're Big Coffin Hunters just like you!" one called impudently across to him.

Jonas drew his gun and pointed it at them—it was done in a flash, and for a moment the terrified boys saw him as he really was: with his eyes blazing and his lips peeled back from his teeth, Jonas looked like a white-haired wolf in man's clothes.

"Get on, you little bastards!" he snarled. "Get on before I blow you loose of your shoes and give your fathers cause to celebrate!"

For a moment they were frozen, and then they fled in a howling pack. One had left his trophy behind; the dog's tail lay on the board sidewalk like a grisly fan. Jonas grimaced at the sight of it, bolstered his gun, locked his hands behind him again, and walked on, looking like a parson meditating on the nature of the gods. And what in gods' name was he doing, pulling iron on a bunch of young hellions like that?

*Being upset*, he thought. *Being worried*.

He was worried, all right. The titless old biddy's suspicions had upset him greatly. Not on Thorin's account—as far as Jonas was concerned, Dearborn could fuck the girl in the town square at high noon of Reaping Fair Day—but because it



suggested that Dearborn might have fooled him about other things.

*Crept up behind you once, he did, and you swore it 'd never happen again. But if he's been diddling that girl, it has happened again. Hasn't it?*

Aye, as they said in these parts. If the boy had had the impertinence to begin an affair with the Mayor's gilly-in-waiting, and the incredible sly-ness to get away with it, what did that do to Jonas's picture of three In-World brats who could barely find their own behinds with both hands and a candle?

*We underestimated em once and they made us look like monkeys,* Clay had said. *I don't want it to happen again.*

*Had* it happened again? How much, really, did Dearborn and his friends know? How much had they found out? And who had they told? If Dearborn had been able to get away with pronging the Mayor's chosen ... to put something *that* large over on Eldred Jonas ... on everyone . . .

"Good day, sai Jonas," Brian Hookey said. He was grinning widely, all but kowtowing before Jonas with his *sombrero* crushed against his broad blacksmith's chest. "Would ye care for fresh *graf*, sai? I've just gotten the new pressing, and—" "All I want is my horse," Jonas said curtly. "Bring it quick and stop your quacking."

"Aye, so I will, happy to oblige, thankee-sai." He hurried off on the errand, taking one nervous, grinning look back over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't going to be shot out of hand.

Ten minutes later Jonas was headed west on the Great Road. He felt a ridiculous but nevertheless strong desire to simply kick his horse into a gallop and leave all this foolishness behind him: Thorin the graying goat-boy, Roland and Susan with their no-doubt mawkish teenage love, Roy and Clay with their fast hands and slow wits. Rimer with his ambitions, Cordelia Delgado with her ghastly visions of the two of them in some bosky dell, him likely reciting poetry while she wove a garland of flowers for his brow.

He had ridden away from things before, when intuition whispered; plenty of things. But there would be no riding away this time. He had vowed vengeance on the brats, and while he had broken a bushel of promises made to others, he'd never broken one made to himself.

And there was John Farson to consider. Jonas had never spoken to the Good Man himself (and never wanted to; Farson was reputed to be whim-sically, dangerously

insane), but he had had dealings with George Latigo, who would probably be leading the troop of Farson's men that would arrive any day now. It was Latigo who had hired the Big Coffin Hunters in the first place, paying a huge cash advance (which Jonas hadn't yet shared with Reynolds and Depape) and promising an even larger piece of war-spoil if the Affiliation's major forces were wiped out in or around the Shaved Mountains.

Latigo was a good-sized bug, all right, but nothing to the size of the bug trundling along behind him. And besides, no large reward was ever achieved without risk. If they delivered the horses, oxen, wagons of fresh vegetables, the tack, the oil, the glass—most of all the wizard's glass—all would be well. If they failed, it was very likely that their heads would end up being whacked about by Farson and his aides in their nightly polo games. It could happen, and Jonas knew it. No doubt someday it *would* happen. But when his head finally parted company from his shoulders, the divorce wouldn't be caused by any such smarms as Dearborn and his friends, no matter *whose* bloodline they had descended from.

*But if he's been having an affair with Thorin 's autumn treat . . . if he's been able to keep such a secret as that, what others has he been keeping? Perhaps he is playing Castles with you.*

If so, he wouldn't play for long. The first time young Mr. Dearborn poked his nose around his Hillock, Jonas would be there to shoot it off for him.

The question for the present was where to go first. Out to the Bar K, to take a long overdue look at the boys' living quarters? He could; they would be counting Barony horses on the Drop, all three of them. But it wasn't over horses that he might lose his head, was it? No, the horses were just a small added attraction, as far as the Good Man was concerned.

Jonas rode for Citgo instead.

## 6

First he checked the tankers. They were just as had been and should be—lined up in a neat row with their new wheels ready to roll when the time came, and hidden behind their new camouflage. Some of the screening pine branches were turning yellow at the tips, but the recent spell of rain had kept most admirably fresh. There had been no tampering that Jonas could see.

Next he climbed the hill, walking beside the pipeline and pausing more and more frequently to rest; by the time he reached the rotting gate between the slope and the oilpatch, his bad leg was painning him severely. He studied the gate, frowning over the smudges he saw on the top rung. They might mean nothing, but Jonas thought someone might have climbed over the gate rather than risk opening it and having it fall off its hinges.

He spent the next hour strolling around the derricks, paying especially close attention to those that still worked, looking for sign. He found plenty of tracks, but it was impossible (especially after a week of wet weather) to read them with any degree of accuracy. The In-World boys might have been out here; that ugly little band of brats from town might have been out here; Arthur Eld and the whole company of his knights might have been out here. The ambiguity put Jonas in a foul temper, as ambiguity (other than on a Castles board) always did.

He started back the way he'd come, meaning to descend the slope to his horse and ride back to town. His leg was aching like fury, and he wanted a stiff drink to quiet it down. The bunkhouse at the Bar K could wait another day.

He got halfway to the gate, saw the weedy spur track tying Citgo to the Great Road, and sighed. There would be nothing on that little strip of road to see, but now that he'd come all the way out here, he supposed he should finish the job. *Bugger finishing the job, I want a damned drink.*

But Roland wasn't the only one who sometimes found his wishes overruled by training. Jonas sighed, rubbed at his leg, then walked back to the weedy twin ruts. Where, it seemed, there was something to find after all.

It lay in the grassy ditch less than a dozen paces from the place where the old road joined the Great Road. At first he saw only a smooth white shape in the weeds and thought it was a stone. Then he saw a black roundness that could only be an eyehole. Not a stone, then; a skull.

Grunting, Jonas knelt and fished it out while the few living derricks continued to squeal and thump behind him. A rook's skull. He had seen it before. Hell, he suspected most of the town had. It belonged to the showoff, Arthur Heath ... who, like all showoffs, needed his little props.

"He called it the lookout," Jonas murmured. "Put it on the horn of his saddle sometimes, didn't he? And sometimes wore it around his neck like a pendant." Yes. The youngster had been wearing it so that night in the Travellers' Rest,

when—

Jonas turned the bird's skull. Something rattled inside like a last lonely thought. Jonas tilted it, shook it over his open palm, and a fragment of gold chain dropped out. That was how the boy had been wearing it. At some point the chain had broken, the skull had fallen in the ditch, and sai Heath had never troubled to go looking for it. The thought that someone might find it had probably never crossed his mind. Boys were careless. It was a wonder any ever grew up to be men. Jonas's face remained calm as he knelt there examining the bird's skull, but behind the unlined brow he was as furious as he had ever been in his life. They had been out here, all right—it was another thing he would have scoffed at just yesterday. He had to assume they had seen the tankers, camouflage or no camouflage, and if not for the chance of finding this skull, he never would have known for sure, one way or the other.

"When I finish with em, their eyesockets'll be as empty as yours. Sir Rook. I'll gouge em clean myself."

He started to throw the skull away, then changed his mind. It might come in handy. Carrying it in one hand, he started back to where he'd left his horse.

7

Coral Thorin walked down High Street toward the Travellers' Rest, her head thumping rustily and her heart sour in her breast. She had been up only an hour, but her hangover was so miserable it felt like a day already. She was drinking too much of late and she knew it—almost every night now—but she was very careful not to take more than one or two (and al-ways light ones) where folks could see. So far, she thought no one sus-pected. And as long as no one suspected, she supposed she would keep on. How else to bear her idiotic brother? This idiotic town? And, of course, the knowledge that all of the ranchers in the Horsemen's Associa-tion and at least half of the large landowners were traitors? "Fuck the Af-filiation," she whispered. "Better a bird in the hand."

But did she really have a bird in the hand? Did any of them? Would 1-arson keep his promises—promises made by a man named Latigo and passed on by their own inimitable Kimba Rimer? Coral had her doubts; despots had such a convenient way of forgetting their promises, and birds in the hand such an irritating way of

pecking your fingers, shitting in your palm, and then flying away. Not that it mattered now; she had made her bed. Besides, folks would always want to drink and gamble and rut, re-gardless of who they bowed their knees to or in whose name their taxes were collected.

Still, when the voice of old demon conscience whispered, a few drinks helped to still its lips.

She paused outside Craven's Undertaking Parlor, looking upstreet at the laughing boys on their ladders, hanging paper lanterns from high poles and building eaves. These gay lamps would be lit on the night of the Reap Fair, filling Hambry's main street with a hundred shades of soft, conflicting light.

For a moment Coral remembered the child she had been, looking at the colored paper lanterns with wonder, listening to the shouts and the rattle of fireworks, listening to the dance-music coming from Green Heart as her father held her hand . . . and, on his other side, her big brother Hart's hand. In this memory, Hart was proudly wearing his first pair of long trousers.

Nostalgia swept her, sweet at first, then bitter. The child had grown into a sallow woman who owned a saloon and whorehouse (not to men-tion a great deal of land along the Drop), a woman whose only sexual partner of late was her brother's Chancellor, a woman whose chief goal upon arising these days was getting to the hair of the dog that bit her as soon as possible. How, exactly, had things turned out so? This woman whose eyes she used was the last woman the child she had been would have expected to become.

"Where did I go wrong?" she asked herself, and laughed. "Oh dear Man Jesus, where did this straying sinner-child go wrong? Can you say hallelujah." She sounded so much like the wandering preacher-woman that had come through town the year before—Pittston, her name had been, Sylvia Pittston—that she laughed again, this time almost naturally. She walked on toward the Rest with a better will. Sheemie was outside, tending to the remains of his silkflowers. He waved to her and called a greeting. She waved back and called something in return. A good enough lad, Sheemie, and although she could have found an-other easily enough, she supposed she was glad Depape hadn't killed him.

The bar was almost empty but brilliantly lit, all the gas-jets flaring. It was clean, as well. Sheemie would have emptied the spittoons, but Coral guessed it was the plump woman behind the bar who had done all the rest. The makeup couldn't hide

the sallowness of that woman's cheeks, the hollow-ness of her eyes, or the way her neck had started to go all crepey (seeing that sort of lizardy skin on a woman's neck always made Coral shiver inside).

It was Pettie the Trotter tending bar beneath The Romp's stem glass gaze, and if allowed to do so, she would continue until Stanley appeared and banished her. Pettie had said nothing out loud to Coral—she knew better—but had made her wants clear enough just the same. Her whoring days were almost at an end. She desperately desired to go to work tending bar. There was precedent for it, Coral knew—a female bartender at Forest Trees in Pass o' the River, and there had been another at Glencove, up the coast in Tavares, until she had died of the pox. What Pettie refused to see was that Stanley Ruiz was younger by fifteen years and in far better health. He would be pouring drinks under The Romp long after Pettie was rotting (instead of Trotting) in a pauper's grave.

"Good even, sai Thorin," Pettie said. And before Coral could so much as open her mouth, the whore had put a shot glass on the bar and filled it full of whiskey. Coral looked at it with dismay. Did they all know, then?

"I don't want that," she snapped. "Why in Eld's name would I? Sun isn't even down! Pour it back into the bottle, for yer father's sake, and then get the hell out of here. Who d'ye think yer serving at five o' the clock, anyway? Ghosts?"

Pettie's face fell a foot; the heavy coat other makeup actually seemed to crack apart. She took the funnel from under the bar, stuck it in the neck of the bottle, and poured the shot of whiskey back in. Some went onto the bar in spite of the funnel; her plump hands (now ringless; her rings had been traded for food at the mercantile across the street long since) were shaking. "I'm sorry, sai. So I am. I was only—"

"I don't care what ye was only," Coral said, then turned a bloodshot eye on Sheb, who had been sitting on his piano-bench and leafing through old sheet-music. Now he was staring toward the bar with his mouth hung open. "And what are *you* looking at, ye frog?"

"Nothing, sai Thorin. I—"

"Then go look at it somewhere else. Take this pig with'ee. Give her a bounce, why don't ye? It'll be good for her skin. It might even be good for yer own."

"I—"

"Get out! Are ye deaf? Both of ye!"

Pettie and Sheb went away toward the kitchen instead of the cribs up-stairs, but it was all the same to Coral. They could go to hell as far as she was concerned. Anywhere, as long as they were out of her aching face.

She went behind the bar and looked around. Two men playing cards over in the far comer. That hardcase Reynolds was watching them and sipping a beer. There was another man at the far end of the bar, but he was staring off into space, lost in his own world. No one was paying any especial attention to sai Coral Thorin, and what did it matter if they were? If Pettie knew, they all knew.

She ran her finger through the puddle of whiskey on the bar, sucked it, ran it through again, sucked it again. She grasped the bottle, but before she could pour, a spidery monstrosity with gray-green eyes leaped, hiss-ing, onto the bar. Coral shrieked and stepped back, dropping the whiskey bottle between her feet . . . where, for a wonder, it didn't break. For a mo-ment she thought her head would break, instead—that her swelling, throbbing brain would simply split her skull like a rotten eggshell. There was a crash as the card-players overturned their table getting up. Rey-nolds had drawn his gun.

"Nay," she said in a quavering voice she could hardly recognize. Her eyeballs were pulsing and her heart was racing. People *could* die of fright, she realized that now. "Nay, gentlemen, all's well."

The six-legged freak standing on the bar opened its mouth, bared its needle fangs, and hissed again.

Coral bent down (and as her head passed below the level of her waist, she was once more sure it was going to explode), picked up the bottle, saw that it was still a quarter full, and drank directly from the neck, no longer caring who saw her do it or what they thought.

As if hearing her thought, Musty hissed again. He was wearing a red collar this afternoon—on him it looked baleful rather than jaunty. Be-neath it was tucked a white scrap of paper.

"Want me to shoot it?" a voice drawled. "I will if you like. One slug and won't be nothing left but claws." It was Jonas, standing just inside the batwings, and although he looked not a whole lot better than she felt, Coral had no doubt he could do it.

"Nay. The old bitch'll turn us all into locusts, or something like, if ye kill her familiar."

"What bitch?" Jonas asked, crossing the room.

"Rhea Dubativo. Rhea of the Coos, she's called."

"Ah! Not the bitch but the witch."

"She's both."

Jonas stroked the cat's back. It allowed itself to be petted, even arch-ing against his hand, but he only gave it the single caress. Its fur had an unpleasant damp feel.

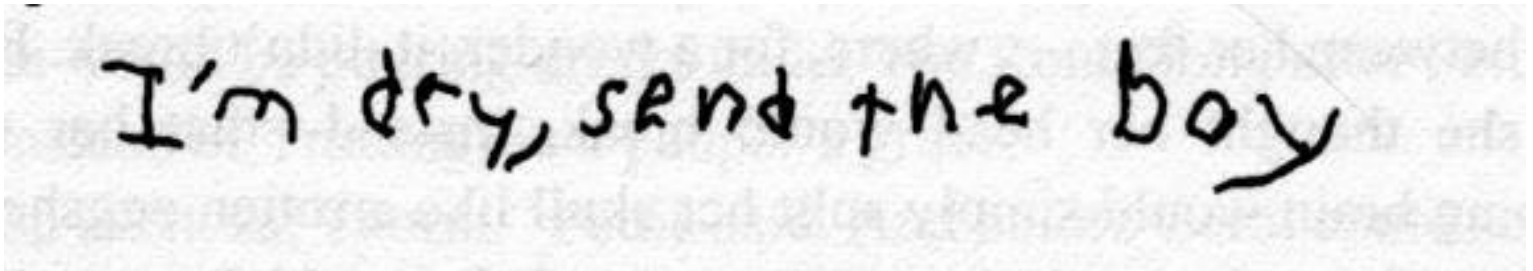
"Would you consider sharing that?" he asked, nodding toward the bottle. "It's early, but my leg hurts like a devil sick of sin."

"Your leg, my head, early or late. On the house."

Jonas raised his white eyebrows.

"Count yer blessings and have at it, cully."

She reached toward Musty. He hissed again, but allowed her to draw the note out from under his collar. She opened it and read the five words that were printed there:



I'm dry, send the boy

"Might I see?" Jonas asked. With the first drink down and warming his belly, the world looked better.

"Why not?" She handed him the note. Jonas looked, then handed it back. He had almost forgotten Rhea, and that wouldn't have done at all. Ah, but it was hard to remember everything, wasn't it? Just lately Jonas felt less like a hired gun than a cook trying to make all nine courses of a state dinner come out at the same time. Luckily, the old hag had reminded him of her presence herself. Gods bless her thirst. And his own, since it had landed him here at the right time.

"Sheemie!" Coral bawled. She could also feel the whiskey working; she felt almost human again. She even wondered if Eldred Jonas might be interested in a dirty evening with the Mayor's sister ... who knew what might speed the hours? Sheemie came in through the batwings, hands grimy, pink *sombrera* bouncing on his back at the end of its *cuerda*. "Aye, Coral Thorin! Here I be!"



She looked past him, calculating the sky. Not tonight, not even for Rhea; she wouldn't send Sheemie up there after dark, and that was the end of it.

"Nothing," she said in a voice that was gentler than usual. "Go back to yer flowers, and see that ye cover them well. It bids frosty."

She turned over Rhea's note and scrawled a single word on it:

**tomorrow**

This she folded and handed to Jonas. "Stick it under that stink's collar for me, will ye? I don't want to touch him."

Jonas did as he was asked. The cat favored them with a final wild green look, then leaped from the bar and vanished beneath the batwings.

"Time is short," Coral said. She hadn't the slightest idea what she meant, but Jonas nodded in what appeared to be perfect understanding. "Would you care to go upstairs with a closet drunk? I'm not much in the looks department, but I can still spread em all the way to the edge of the bed, and I don't just lie there."

He considered, then nodded. His eyes were gleaming. This one was as thin as Cordelia Delgado ... but what a difference, eh? What a difference! "All right."

"I've been known to say some nasty things—fair warning."

"Dear lady, I shall be all ears."

She smiled. Her headache was gone. "Aye. I'll just bet ye will."

"Give me a minute. Don't move a step." He walked across to where Reynolds sat.

"Drag up a chair, Eldred."

"I think not. There's a lady waiting."

Reynolds's gaze flicked briefly toward the bar. "You're joking."

"I never joke about women, Clay. Now mark me."

Reynolds sat forward, eyes intent. Jonas was grateful this wasn't Depape. Roy would do what you asked, and usually well enough, but only after you'd explained it to him half a dozen times.

"Go to Lengyll," he said. "Tell him we want to put about a dozen men—no less than ten—out at yon oilpatch. Good men who can get their heads down and keep them down and not snap the trap too soon on an ambush, if ambushing's required. Tell him Brian Hockey's to be in charge. He's got a level head, which is more than can be said for most of these poor things."

Reynolds's eyes were hot and happy. "You expect the brats?"

"They've been out there once, mayhap they'll be out again. If so, they're to be crossfired and knocked down dead. At once and with no warning. You understand?"

"Yar! And the tale after?"

"Why, that the oil and the tankers must have been their business," Jonas said with a crooked smile. "To be taken to Farson, at their com-mand and by confederates unknown. We'll be carried through the streets on the town's shoulders, come Reap. Hailed as the men who rooted out the traitors. Where's Roy?"

"Gone back to Hanging Rock. I saw him at noon. He says they're coming, Eldred; says when the wind swings into the east, he can hear ap-proaching horse."

"Maybe he only hears what he wants to hear." But he suspected Depape was right. Jonas's mood, at rock bottom when he stepped into the Travellers' Rest, was now very much on the rebound.

"We'll start moving the tankers soon, whether the brats come or not. At night, and two by two, like the animals going on board Old Pa's Ark." He laughed at this.

"But we'll leave some, eh? Like cheese in a trap."

"Suppose the mice don't come?"

Jonas shrugged. "If not one way, another. I intend to press them a lit-tle more tomorrow. I want them angry, and I want them confused. Now go on about your business. I have yon lady waiting."

"Better you than me, Eldred."

Jonas nodded. He guessed that half an hour from now, he would have forgotten all about his aching leg. "That's right," he said. "You she'd eat like fudge."

He walked back to the bar, where Coral stood with her arms folded. Now she unfolded them and took his hands. The right she put on her left breast. The nipple was hard and erect under his fingers. The forefinger of his left hand she put in her mouth, and bit down lightly.

"Shall we bring the bottle?" Jonas asked.

"Why not?" said Coral Thorin.

If she'd gone to sleep as drunk as had been her habit over the last few months, the

creak of the bedsprings wouldn't have awakened her—a bomb-blast wouldn't have awakened her. But although they'd brought the bottle, it still stood on the night-table of the bedroom she maintained at the Rest (it was as big as any three of the whores' cribs put together), the level of the whiskey unchanged. She felt sore all over her body, but her head was clear; sex was good for that much, anyway. Jonas was at the window, looking out at the first gray traces of day-light and pulling his pants up. His bare back was covered with criss-crossed scars. She thought to ask him who had administered such a savage flogging and how he'd survived it, then decided she'd do better to keep quiet.

"Where are ye off to?" she asked.

"I believe I'm going to start by finding some paint—any shade will do—and a street-mutt still in possession of its tail. After that, sai, I don't think you want to know."

"Very well." She lay down and pulled the covers up to her chin. She felt she could sleep for a week.

Jonas yanked on his boots and went to the door, buckling his gunbelt. He paused with his hand on the knob. She looked at him, grayish eyes already half-filled with sleep again.

"I've never had better," Jonas said.

Coral smiled. "No, cully," she said. "Nor I."

## CHAPTER IV

# Roland AND Cuthbert

## 1

Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain came out onto the porch of the Bar K bunkhouse almost two hours after Jonas had left Coral's room at the Trav-ellers' Rest. By then the sun was well up over the horizon. They weren't late risers by nature, but as Cuthbert put it, "We have a certain In-World image to maintain. Not laziness but *lounginess*."

Roland stretched, arms spread toward the sky in a wide Y, then bent and grasped the toes of his boots. This caused his back to crackle.

"I hate that noise," Alain said. He sounded morose and sleepy. In fact, he had been troubled by odd dreams and premonitions all night—things which, of the three of them, only he was prey to. Because of the touch, perhaps—with him it had always been strong.

"That's why he does it," Cuthbert said, then clapped Alain on the shoulder. "Cheer up, old boy. You're too handsome to be downhearted."

Roland straightened, and they walked across the dusty yard toward the stables. Halfway there, he came to a stop so sudden that Alain almost ran into his back. Roland was looking east. "Oh," he said in a funny, be-mused voice. He even smiled a little.

"Oh?" Cuthbert echoed. "Oh what, great leader? Oh joy, I shall see the perfumed lady anon, or oh rats, I must work with my smelly male companions all the livelong day?"

Alain looked down at his boots, new and uncomfortable when they had left Gilead, now sprung, trailworn, a little down at the heels, and as comfortable as workboots ever got. Looking at them was better than look-ing at his friends, for the time being. There was always an edge to Cuthbert's teasing these days; the old sense of fun had been replaced by something that was mean and unpleasant. Alain kept expecting Roland to flash up at one of Cuthbert's jibes, like steel that has been struck by sharp flint, and knock Bert sprawling. In a way, Alain almost wished for it. It might clear the air.

But not the air of this morning.

"Just oh," Roland said mildly, and walked on.

"Cry your pardon, for I know you'll not want to hear it, but I'd speak a further word about the pigeons," Cuthbert said as they saddled their mounts. "I still believe that a message—"

"I'll make you a promise," Roland said, smiling.

Cuthbert looked at him with some mistrust. "Aye?"

"If you still want to send by flight tomorrow morning, we'll do so. The one you choose shall be sent west to Gilead with a message of your devising banded to its leg. What do you say, Arthur Heath? Is it fair?"

Cuthbert looked at him for a moment with a suspicion that hurt Alain's heart. Then he also smiled. "Fair," he said. "Thank you."

And then Roland said something which struck Alain as odd and made that prescient part of him quiver with disquiet. "Don't thank me yet."

## 2

"I don't want to go up there, sai Thorin," Sheemie said. An unusual expression had creased his normally smooth face—a troubled and fearful frown. "She's a scary lady. Scary as a beary, she is. Got a wart on her nose, right here." He thumbed the tip of his own nose, which was small and smooth and well molded. Coral, who might have bitten his head off for such hesitation only yesterday, was unusually patient today. "So true," she said. "But Sheemie, she asked for ye special, and she tips. Ye know she does, and well."

"Won't help if she turns me into a beetle," Sheemie said morosely. "Beetles can't spend coppers."

Nevertheless, he let himself be led to where Caprichoso, the inn's pack-mule, was tied. Barkie had loaded two small tuns over the mule's back. One, filled with sand, was just there for balance. The other held a fresh pressing of the *graf* Rhea had a taste for.

"Fair-Day's coming," Coral said brightly. "Why, it's not three weeks now."

"Aye." Sheemie looked happier at this. He loved Fair-Days passionately—the lights, the firecrackers, the dancing, the games, the laughter. When Fair-Day came, everyone was happy and no one spoke mean.

"A young man with coppers in his pocket is sure to have a good time at the Fair," Coral said.

"That's true, sai Thorin." Sheemie looked like someone who has just discovered one of life's great principles. "Aye, truey-true, so it is."

Coral put Caprichoso's rope halter into Sheemie's palm and closed the fingers over it. "Have a nice trip, lad. Be polite to the old crow, bow yer best bow . . . and make sure ye're back down the hill before dark."

"Long before, aye," Sheemie said, shivering at the very thought of still being up in the Coos after nightfall. "Long before, sure as loaves 'n fishes."

"Good lad." Coral watched him off, his pink *sombrero* now clapped on his head, leading the grumpy old pack-mule by its rope. And, as he dis-appeared over the brow of the first mild hill, she said it again: "Good lad."

### 3

Jonas waited on the flank of a ridge, belly-down in the tall grass, until the brats were an hour gone from the Bar K. He then rode to the ridgetop and picked them out, three dots four miles away on the brown slope. Off to do their daily duty. No sign they suspected anything. They were smarter than he had at first given them credit for ... but nowhere near as smart as they thought they were.

He rode to within a quarter mile of the Bar K—except for the bunk-house and stable, a burned-out hulk in the bright sunlight of this early autumn day—and tethered his horse in a copse of cottonwoods that grew around the ranch house spring. Here the boys had left some washing to dry. Jonas stripped the pants and shirts off the low branches upon which they had been hung, made a pile of them, pissed on them, and then went back to his horse.

The animal stamped the ground emphatically when Jonas pulled the dog's tail from one of his saddlebags, as if saying he was glad to be rid of it. Jonas would be glad to be rid of it, too. It had begun giving off an un-mistakable aroma. From the other saddlebag he took a small glass jar of red paint, and a brush. These he had obtained from Brian Hockey's eldest son, who was minding the livery stable today. Sai Hookey himself would be out to Citgo by now, no doubt.

Jonas walked to the bunkhouse with no effort at concealment . . . not that there was much in the way of concealment to be had out here. And no one to hide from,

anyway, now that the boys were gone.

One of them had left an actual book— Mercer's *Homilies and Meditations*— on the seat of a rocking chair on the porch. Books were things of exquisite rarity in Mid-World, especially as one travelled out from the center. This was the first one, except for the few kept in Seafront, that Jonas had seen since coming to Mejis. He opened it. In a firm woman's hand he read: *To my dearest son, from his loving MOTHER*. Jonas tore j (Ins page out, opened his jar of paint, and dipped the tips of his last two fingers inside. He blotted out the word MOTHER with the pad of his third finger, then, using the nail of his pinky as a makeshift pen, printed CUNT above MOTHER. He poked this sheet on a rusty nailhead where it was sure to be seen, then tore the book up and stamped on the pieces. Which boy had it belonged to? He hoped it was Dearborn's, but it didn't really matter.

The first thing Jonas noticed when he went inside was the pigeons, cooing in their cages. He had thought they might be using a helio to send (heir messages, but pigeons! My! That was ever so much more trig!

"I'll get to you in a few minutes," he said. "Be patient, darlings; peck and shit while you still can."

He looked around with some curiosity, the soft coo of the pigeons soothing in his ears. Lads or lords? Roy had asked the old man in Ritzy. The old man had said maybe both. Neat lads, at the very least, from the way they kept their quarters, Jonas thought. Well trained. Three bunks, all made. Three piles of goods at the foot of each, stacked up just as neat. In each pile he found a picture of a mother—oh, such good fellows they were—and in one he found a picture of both parents. He had hoped for names, possibly documents of some kind (even love letters from the girl, mayhap), but there was nothing like that. Lads or lords, they were careful enough. Jonas removed the pictures from their frames and shredded them. The goods he scattered to all points of the compass, destroying as much as he could in the limited time he had. When he found a linen handkerchief in the pocket of a pair of dress pants, he blew his nose on it and then spread it carefully on the toes of the boy's dress boots, so that the green splat would show to good advantage. What could be more aggravating— more *unsettling*—than to come home after a hard day spent tallying stock and find some stranger's snot on one of your personals?

The pigeons were upset now; they were incapable of scolding like jays or rooks,

but they tried to flutter away from him when he opened their cages. It did no good, of course. He caught them one by one and twisted their heads off. That much accomplished, Jonas popped one bird beneath the strawtick pillow of each boy. Beneath one of these pillows he found a small bonus: paper strips and a storage-pen, undoubtedly kept for the composition of messages. He broke the pen and flung it across the room. The strips he put in his own pocket. Paper always came in handy.

With the pigeons seen to, he could hear better. He began walking slowly back and forth on the board floor, head cocked, listening.

4

When Alain came riding up to him at a gallop, Roland ignored the boy's strained white face and burning, frightened eyes. "I make it thirty-one on my side," he said, "all with the Barony brand, crown and shield. You?"

"We have to go back," Alain said. "Something's wrong. It's the touch. I've never felt it so clear."

"Your count?" Roland asked again. There were times, such as now, when he found Alain's ability to use the touch more annoying than helpful.

"Forty. Or forty-one, I forget. And what does it matter? They've moved what they don't want us to count. Roland, didn't you hear me? We have to go back!

Something's wrong! *Something's wrong at our place!*"

Roland glanced toward Bert, riding peaceably some five hundred yards away.

Then he looked back at Alain, his eyebrows raised in a silent question.

"Bert? He's numb to the touch and always has been—you know it. I'm not. You know I'm not! Roland, please! Whoever it is will see the pi-geons! Maybe find *our guns!*" The normally phlegmatic Alain was nearly crying in his excitement and dismay. "If you won't go back with me, give me leave to go back by myself! Give me leave, Roland, for your father's sake!"

"*For your father's sake, I give you none,*" Roland said. "My count is thirty-one. Yours is forty. Yes, we'll say forty. Forty's a good number— good as any, I wot. Now we'll change sides and count again."

"What's wrong with you?" Alain almost whispered. He was looking at Roland as if Roland had gone mad.



"Nothing."

"You *knew!* You knew when we left this morning!"

"Oh, I might have seen something," Roland said. "A reflection, perhaps, but ... do you trust me, Al? That's what matters, I think. Do you trust me, or do you think I lost my wits when I lost my heart? As he does?" He jerked his head in Cuthbert's direction. Roland was looking at Alain with a faint smile on his lips, but his eyes were ruthless and distant it was Roland's over-the-horizon look. Alain wondered if Susan Delgado had seen that expression yet, and if she had, what she made of it.

"I trust you." By now Alain was so confused that he didn't know for Mire if that was a lie or the truth.

"Good. Then switch sides with me. My count is thirty-one, mind."

"Thirty-one," Alain agreed. He raised his hands, then dropped them back to his thighs with a slap so sharp his normally stolid mount laid his ears back and jiggled a bit under him. "Thirty-one."

"I think we may go back early today, if that's any satisfaction to you," Roland said, and rode away. Alain watched him. He'd always wondered what went on in Roland's head, but never more than now.

5

*Creak. Creak-creak.*

Here was what he'd been listening for, and just as Jonas was about to give up the hunt. He had expected to find their hidey-hole a little closer to their beds, but they were trig, all right.

He went to one knee and used the blade of his knife to pry up the board which had creaked. Under it were three bundles, each swaddled in dark strips of cotton cloth. These strips were damp to the touch and smelled fragrantly of gun-oil. Jonas took the bundles out and unwrapped each, curious to see what sort of calibers the youngsters had brought. The answer turned out to be serviceable but undistinguished. Two of the bundles contained single five-shot revolvers of a type then called (for no reason I know) "carvers." The third contained two guns, six-shooters of higher quality than the carvers. In fact, for one heart-stopping moment, Jonas thought he had found the big revolvers of a gunslinger—true-blue steel barrels, sandalwood grips, bores like mineshafts. Such guns he could not

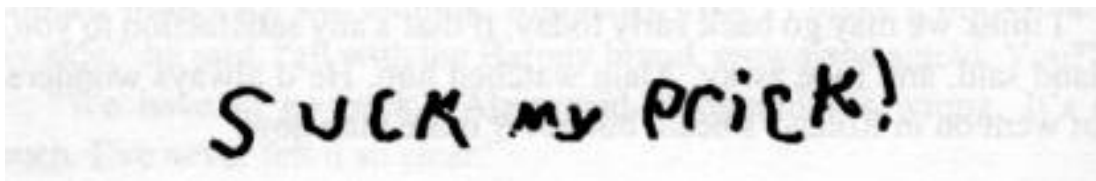
have left, no matter what the cost to his plans. Seeing the plain grips was thus something of a relief. Disappointment was never a thing you looked for, but it had a wonderful way of clearing the mind.

He rewrapped the guns and put them back, put the board back as well. A gang of ne'er-do-well clots from town might possibly come out here, and might possibly vandalize the unguarded bunkhouse, scattering what they didn't tear up, but find a hiding place such as this? No, my son. Not likely.

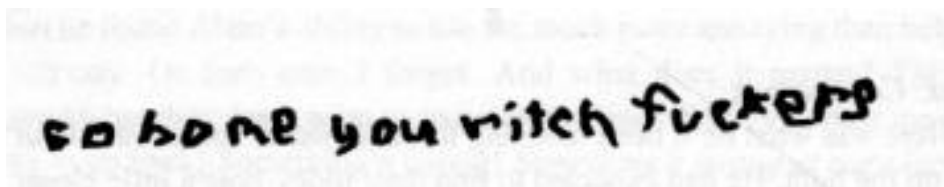
*Do you really think they'll believe it was hooligans from town that did this?*

They might; just because he had underestimated them to start with didn't mean he should turn about-face and begin overestimating them now. And he had the luxury of not needing to care. Either way, it would make them angry. Angry enough to rush full-tilt around their Hillock, perhaps. To throw caution to the wind . . . and reap the whirlwind.

Jonas poked the end of the severed dog's tail into one of the pigeon-cages, so it stuck up like a huge, mocking feather. He used the paint to write such charmingly boyish slogans as

A photograph of a wall with a single line of graffiti written in black paint. The text reads "SUCK MY PRICK!" in a crude, hand-drawn font.

and

A photograph of a wall with a single line of graffiti written in black paint. The text reads "GO HOME YOU RITCH FUCKERS" in a crude, hand-drawn font.

on the walls. Then he left, standing on the porch for a moment to verify he still had the Bar K to himself. Of course he did. Yet for a blink or two, there at the end, he'd felt uneasy—almost as though he'd been scented. By some sort of In-World telepathy, mayhap.

*There is such; you know it. The touch, it's called.*

Aye, but that was the tool of gunslingers, artists, and lunatics. Not of boys, be they lords or just lads.

Jonas went back to his horse at a near-trot nevertheless, mounted, and rode toward

town. Things were reaching the boil, and there would be a lot to do before Demon Moon rose full in the sky.

6

Rhea's hut, its stone walls and the cracked *guijarros* of its roof slimed with moss, huddled on the last hill of the Coos. Beyond it was a magnificent view northwest—the Bad Grass, the desert, Hanging Rock, Eyebolt Canyon—but scenic vistas were the last thing on Sheemie's mind as he led Capriccioso cautiously into Rhea's yard not long after noon. He'd been hungry for the last hour or so, but now the pangs were gone. He hated this place worse than any other in Barony, even more than Citgo with its big towers always going creakedy-creak and clangety-clang.

"Sai?" he called, leading the mule into the yard. Capi balked as they neared the hut, planting his feet and lowering his neck, but when Sheemie tugged the halter, he came on again. Sheemie was almost sorry.

"Ma'am? Nice old lady that wouldn't hurt a fly? You therey-air? It's good old Sheemie with your *graf*." He smiled and held out his free hand, palm up, to demonstrate his exquisite harmlessness, but from the hut there was still no response. Sheemie felt his guts first coil, then cramp. For a moment he thought he was going to shit in his pants just like a babby; then he passed wind and felt a little better. In his bowels, at least.

He walked on, liking this less at every step. The yard was rocky and the straggling weeds yellowish, as if the hut's resident had blighted the very earth with her touch. There was a garden, and Sheemie saw that the vegetables still in it—pumpkins and sharproot, mostly—were muties. Then he noticed the garden's stuffy-guy. It was also a mutie, a nasty thing with two straw heads instead of one and what appeared to be a stuffed hand in a woman's satin glove poking out of the chest area.

*Sai Thorin'll never talk me up here again*, he thought. *Not for all the pennies in the world.*

The hut's door stood open. To Sheemie it looked like a gaping mouth. A sickish dank smell drifted out.

Sheemie stopped about fifteen paces from the house, and when Capi nuzzled his bottom (as if to ask what was keeping them), the boy uttered a brief screech. The

sound of it almost set him running, and it was only by exercising all his willpower that he was able to stand his ground. The day was bright, but up here on this hill, the sun seemed meaningless. This wasn't his first trip up here, and Rhea's hill had never been pleasant, but it was somehow worse now. It made him feel the way the sound of the thinny made him feel when he woke and heard it in the middle of the night. As if something awful was sliding toward him—something that was all insane eyes and red, reaching claws.

"S-S-Sai? Is anyone here? Is—"

"Come closer." The voice drifted out of the open door. "Come to where I can see you, idiot boy."

Trying not to moan or cry, Sheemie did as the voice said. He had an idea that he was never going back down the hill again. Capriccioso, per-haps, but not him. Poor old Sheemie was going to end up in the cookpot—hot dinner tonight, soup tomorrow, cold snacks until Year's End. That's what he would be.

He made his reluctant way to Rhea's stoop on rubbery legs—if his knees had been closer together, they would have knocked like castanets. She didn't even *sound* the same.

"S-Sai? I'm afraid. So I a-a-am."

"So ye should be," the voice said. It drifted and drifted, slipping out into the sunlight like a sick puff of smoke. "Never mind, though—just do as I say. Come closer, Sheemie, son of Stanley."

Sheemie did so, although terror dragged at every step he took. The mule followed, head down. Capi had honked like a goose all the way up here—honked ceaselessly—but now he had fallen silent.

"So here ye be," the voice buried in those shadows whispered. "Here ye be, indeed."

She stepped into the sunlight falling through the open door, wincing for a moment as it dazzled her eyes. Clashed in her arms was the empty *graf* barrel. Coiled around her throat like a necklace was Ermot.

Sheemie had seen the snake before, and on previous occasions had never failed to wonder what sort of agonies he might suffer before he died if he happened to be bitten by such. Today he had no such thoughts. Compared to Rhea, Ermot looked normal. The old woman's face had sunken at the cheeks, giving the rest of her head the look of a skull. Brown spots swarmed out of her thin hair and over her

bulging brow like an army of invading insects. Below her left eye was an open sore, and her grin showed only a few remaining teeth.

"Don't like the way I look, do'ee?" she asked. "Makes yer heart cold, don't it?"

"N-No," Sheemie said, and then, because that didn't sound right: "I mean yes!" But gods, that sounded even worse. "You're beautiful, sai!" he blurted.

She chuffed nearly soundless laughter and thrust the empty tun into his arms almost hard enough to knock him on his ass. The touch of her fingers was brief, but long enough to make his flesh crawl.

"Well-a-day. They say handsome is as handsome does, don't they?"

And that suits me. Aye, right down to the ground. Bring me my *graf*, idiot child."

"Y-yes, sai! Right away, sai!" He took the empty tun back to the mule, set it down, then fumbled loose the cordage holding the little barrel of *graf*. He was very aware of her watching him, and it made him clumsy, hut finally he got the barrel loose. It almost slid through his grasp, and there was a nightmarish moment when he thought it would fall to the stony ground and smash, but he caught his grip again at the last second. He took it to her, had just a second to realize she was no longer wearing the snake, then felt it crawling on his boots. Ermot looked up at him, hiss-ing and baring a double set of fangs in an eerie grin.

"Don't move too fast, my boy. 'Twouldn't be wise—Ermot's grumpy today. Set the barrel just inside the door, here. It's too heavy for me. Missed a few meals of late, I have."

Sheemie bent from the waist (*bow yer best bow*, Sai Thorin had said, and here he was, doing just that), grimacing, not daring to ease the pres-sure on his back by moving his feet because the snake was still on them. When he straightened, Rhea was holding out an old and stained envelope. The flap had been sealed with a blob of red wax. Sheemie dreaded to think what might have been rendered down to make wax such as that.

"Take this and give it to Cordelia Delgado. Do ye know her?"

"A-Aye," Sheemie managed. "Susan-sai's auntie."

"That's right." Sheemie reached tentatively for the envelope, but she held it back a moment. "Can't read, can ye, idiot boy?"

"Nay. Words 'n letters go right out of my head."

"Good. Mind ye show this to no one who can, or some night ye'll find Ermot waiting under yer pillow. I see far, Sheemie, d'ye mark me? I *see far*"

It was just an envelope, but it felt heavy and somehow dreadful in Sheemie's fingers, as if it were made out of human skin instead of paper. And what sort of letter could Rhea be sending Cordelia Delgado, any-way? Sheemie thought back to the day he'd seen sai Delgado's face all covered with cobwebbies, and shivered. The horrid creature lurking before him in the doorway of her hut could have been the very creature who'd spun those webs.

"Lose it and I'll know," Rhea whispered. "Show my business to another, and I'll know. Remember, son of Stanley, I see far."

"I'll be careful, sai." It might be better if he *did* lose the envelope, but he wouldn't. Sheemie was dim in the head, everyone said so, but not so dim that he didn't understand why he had been called up here: not to deliver a barrel of *graf*, but to receive this letter and pass it on.

"Would ye care to come in for a bit?" she whispered, and then pointed a ringer at his crotch. "If I give ye a little bit of mushroom to eat—special to me, it is—I can look like anyone ye fancy."

"Oh, I can't," he said, clutching his trousers and smiling a huge broad smile that felt like a scream trying to get out of his skin. "That pesky thing fell off last week, that did."

For a moment Rhea only gawped at him, genuinely surprised for one of the few times in her life, and then she once more broke out in chuffing bursts of laughter. She held her stomach in her waxy hands and rocked back and forth with glee. Ermot, startled, streaked into the house on his lengthy green belly. From somewhere in its depths, her cat hissed at it.

"Go on," Rhea said, still laughing. She leaned forward and dropped three or four pennies into his shirt pocket. "Get out of here, ye great galoophus! Don't ye linger, either, looking at flowers!"

"No, sai—"

Before he could say more, the door clapped to so hard that dust puffed out of the cracks between the boards.

Roland surprised Cuthbert by suggesting at two o' the clock that they go back to the Bar K. When Bert asked why, Roland only shrugged and would say nothing

more. Bert looked at Alain and saw a queer, musing expression on the boy's face. As they drew closer to the bunkhouse, a sense of foreboding filled Cuthbert. They topped a rise, and looked down at the Bar K. The bunk-house door stood open. "Roland!" Alain cried. He was pointing to the cottonwood grove where the ranch's spring was. Their clothes, neatly hung to dry when they left, were now scattered hell-to-breakfast.

Cuthbert dismounted and ran to them. Picked up a shirt, sniffed it, flung it away. "Pissed on!" he cried indignantly.

"Come on," Roland said. "Let's look at the damage."

## 8

There was a lot of damage to look at. *As you expected*, Cuthbert thought, gazing at Roland. Then he turned to Alain, who appeared gloomy but not really surprised. *As you both expected*.

Roland bent toward one of the dead pigeons, and plucked at some-thing so fine Cuthbert at first couldn't see what it was. Then he straight-ened up and held it out to his friends. A single hair. Very long, very white. He opened the pinch of his thumb and forefinger and let it waft to the floor. There it lay amid the shredded remains of Cuthbert Allgood's mother and father.

"If you knew that old corbie was here, why didn't we come back and end his breath?" Cuthbert heard himself ask.

"Because the time was wrong," Roland said mildly.

"*He* would have done it, had it been one of us in his place, destroying his things."

"We're not like him," Roland said mildly.

"I'm going to find him and blow his teeth out the back of his head."

"Not at all," Roland said mildly.

If Bert had to listen to one more mild word from Roland's mouth, he would run mad. All thoughts of fellowship and *ka-tet* left his mind, which sank back into his body and was at once obliterated by simple red fury. Jonas had been here. Jonas had pissed on their clothes, called Alain's mother a cunt, torn up their most treasured pictures, painted childish ob-scenities on their walls, killed their pigeons. Roland had known . . . done nothing . . . intended to *continue* doing nothing. Except fuck his gilly-girl. He would do plenty of that, aye, because now that was

all he cared about.

*But she won't like the look of your face the next time you climb into the saddle,* Cuthbert thought. *I'll see to that.*

He drew back his fist. Alain caught his wrist. Roland turned away and began picking up scattered blankets, as if Cuthbert's furious face and cocked fist were simply of no account to him.

Cuthbert balled up his other fist, meaning to make Alain let go of him, one way or the other, but the sight of his friend's round and honest face, so guileless and dismayed, quieted his rage a little. His argument wasn't with Alain. Cuthbert was sure the other boy had known something bad was happening here, but he was also sure that Roland had insisted Alain do nothing until Jonas was gone.

"Come with me," Alain muttered, slinging an arm around Bert's shoulders.

"Outside. For your father's sake, come. You have to cool off. This is no time to be fighting among ourselves."

"It's no time for our leader's brains to drain down into his prick, ei-ther," Cuthbert said, making no effort to lower his voice. But the second time Alain tugged him, Bert allowed himself to be led toward the door.

*I'll stay my rage at him this one last time,* he thought, *but I think—I know—that is all I can manage. I'll have Alain tell him so.*

The idea of using Alain as a go-between to his best friend—of knowing that things had come to such a pass—filled Cuthbert with an angry, de-spairing rage, and at the door to the porch he turned back to Roland. "*She has made you a coward,*" he said in the High Speech. Beside him, Alain drew in his breath sharply.

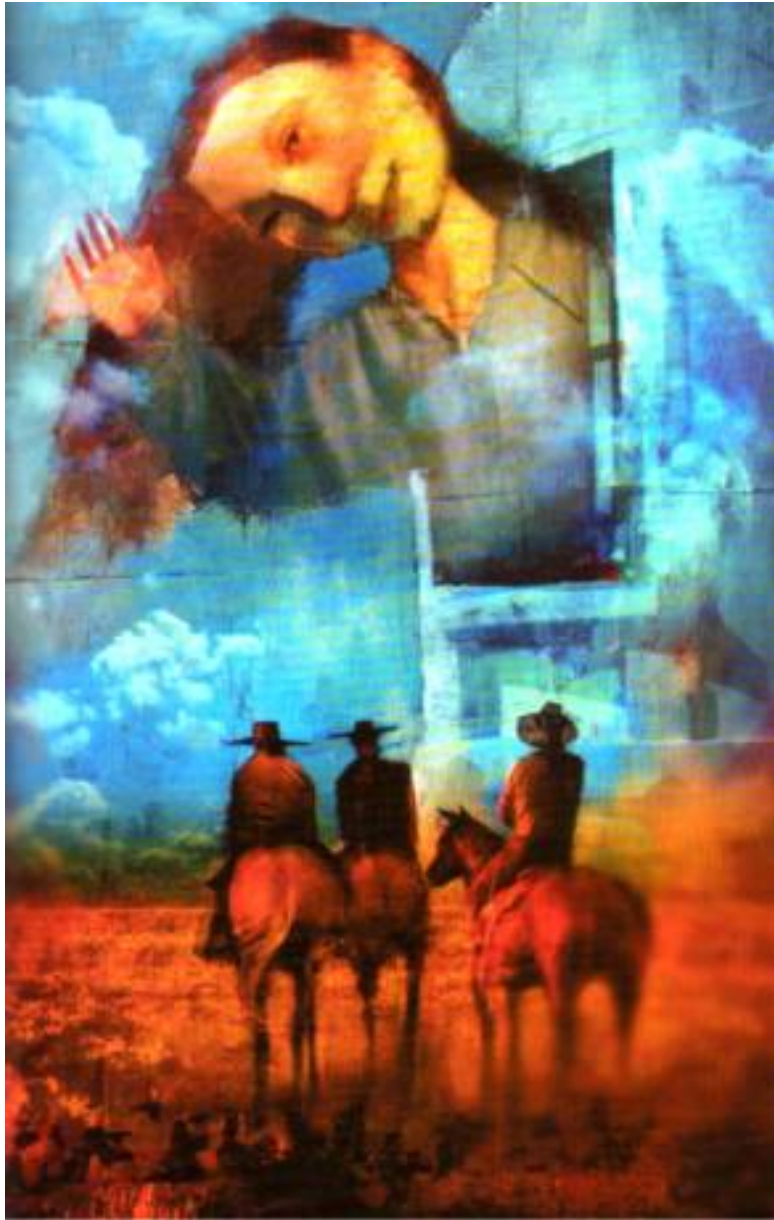
Roland stopped as if suddenly turned to stone, his back to them, his arms full of blankets. In that moment Cuthbert was sure Roland would turn and rush toward him. They would fight, likely until one of them was dead or blind or unconscious. Likely that one would be him, but he no longer cared.

But Roland never turned. Instead, in the same speech, he said: "*He came to steal our guile and our caution. With you, he has succeeded.*"

"No," Cuthbert said, lapsing back into the low speech. "I know that part of you really believes that, but it's not so. The truth is, you've lost your compass. You've called your carelessness love and made a virtue of irresponsibility. I—"

"For gods' sake, come!" Alain nearly snarled, and yanked him out the door.





9

With Roland out of sight, Cuthbert felt his rage veering toward Alain in spite of himself; it turned like a weathervane when the wind shifts. The two of them stood facing each other in the sunshiny dooryard, Alain looking unhappy and distracted, Cuthbert with his hands knotted into fists so tight they trembled at his sides.

"Why do you always excuse him? Why?"

"Out on the Drop, he asked if I trusted him. I said I did. And I do."

"Then you're a fool."

"And he's a gunslinger. It he says we must wait longer, we must."

"He's a gunslinger by accident! A freak! A mutie!"

Alain stared at him in silent shock.

"Come with me, Alain. It's time to end this mad game. We'll find Jonas and kill him. Our *ka-tet* is broken. We'll make a new one, you and I."

"It's not broken. If it does break, it'll be you responsible. And for that I'll never forgive you."

Now it was Cuthbert's turn to be silent.

"Go for a ride, why don't you? A long one. Give yourself time to cool off. So much depends on our fellowship—"

"Tell *him* that!"

"No, I'm telling *you*. Jonas wrote a foul word about my mother. Don't you think I'd go with you just to avenge that, if I didn't think that Roland was right? That it's what Jonas wants? For us to lose our wits and come charging blindly around our Hillock?"

"That's right, but it's wrong, too," Cuthbert said. Yet his hands were slowly unrolling, fists becoming fingers again. "You don't see and I don't have the words to explain. If I say that Susan has poisoned the well of our *ka-tet*, you would call me jealous. Yet I think she has, all unknowing and unmeaning. She's poisoned his mind, and the door to hell has opened. Roland feels the heat from that open door and thinks it's only his feeling for her . . . but we must do better, Al. We must *think* better. For him as well as for ourselves and our fathers."

"Are you calling her our enemy?"

"No! It would be easier if she was." He took a deep breath, let it out, took another, let it out, took a third and let it out. With each one he felt a little saner, a little more himself. "Never mind. There's no more to say on't for now. Your advice is good—I think I will take a ride. A long one."

Bert started toward his horse, then turned back.

"Tell him he's wrong. Tell him that even if he's right about waiting, he's right for the wrong reasons, and that makes him all the way wrong." He hesitated. "Tell him what I said about the door to hell. Say that's *my* piece of the touch. Will you tell him?"

"Yes. Stay away from Jonas, Bert."

Cuthbert mounted up. "I promise nothing."

"You're not a man." Alain sounded sorrowful; on the point of tears, in fact. "None of us are men."

"You better be wrong about that," Cuthbert said, "because men's work is coming." He turned his mount and rode away at a gallop.

10

He went far up the Seacoast Road, to begin with trying not to think at all. He'd found that sometimes unexpected things wandered into your head if you left the door open for them. Useful things, often.

This afternoon that didn't happen. Confused, miserable, and without a fresh idea in his head (or even the hope of one), Bert at last turned back to Hambry. He rode the High Street from end to end, waving or speaking to people who hailed him. The three of them had met a lot of good people here. Some he counted as friends, and he rather felt the common folk of Hambrytown had adopted them—young fellows who were far from their own homes and families. And the more Bert knew and saw of these com-mon folk, the less he suspected that they were a part of Rimer's and Jonas's nasty little game. Why else had the Good Man chosen Hambry in the first place, if not because it provided such excellent cover?

There were plenty of folk out today. The farmers' market was boom-ing, the street-stalls were crowded, children were laughing at a Pinch and Jilly show (Jilly was currently chasing Pinch back and forth and bashing the poor old longsuffering fellow with her broom), and the Reaping Fair decorations were going forward at speed. Yet Cuthbert felt only a little joy and anticipation at the thought of the Fair. Because it wasn't his own, wasn't Gilead Reaping? Perhaps . . . but mostly just because his mind and heart were so heavy. If this was what growing up was like, he thought he could have skipped the experience.

He rode on out of town, the ocean now at his back, the sun full in his face, his shadow growing ever longer behind him. He thought he'd soon veer off the Great Road and ride across the Drop to the Bar K. But before he could, here came his old friend, Sheemie, leading a mule. Sheemie's head was down, his shoulders slumped, his pink *'brera* askew, his boots dusty. To Cuthbert he looked as though he had walked all the way from the tip of the earth.

"Sheemie!" Cuthbert cried, already anticipating the boy's cheery grin and loony

patter. "Long days and pleasant nights! How are y—"

Sheemie lifted his head, and as the brim of his *sombrero* came up, Cuthbert fell silent. He saw the dreadful fear on the boy's face—the pale checks, the haunted eyes, the trembling mouth.

11

Sheemie could have been at the Delgado place two hours ago, if he'd wanted, but he had trudged along at a turtle's pace, the letter inside his shirt seeming to drag at his every step. It was awful, so awful. He couldn't even think about it, because his thinker was mostly broken, so it was.

Cuthbert was off his horse in a flash, and hurrying to Sheemie. He put his hands on the boy's shoulders. "What's wrong? Tell your old pal. He won't laugh, not a bit."

At the sound of "Arthur Heath's" kind voice and the sight of his concerned face, Sheemie began to weep. Rhea's strict command that he should tell no one flew out of his head. Still sobbing, he recounted every-thing that had happened since that morning. Twice Cuthbert had to ask him to slow down, and when Bert led the boy to a tree in whose shade the two of them sat together, Sheemie was finally able to do so. Cuthbert listened with growing unease. At the end of his tale, Sheemie produced an envelope from inside his shirt.

Cuthbert broke the seal and read what was inside, his eyes growing large.

12

Roy Depape was waiting for him at the Travellers' Rest when Jonas re-turned in good spirits from his trip to the Bar K. An outrider had finally shown up, Depape announced, and Jonas's spirits rose another notch. Only Roy didn't look as happy about it as Jonas would have expected. Not happy at all.

"Fellow's gone on to Seafront, where I guess he's expected," Depape said. "He wants you right away. I wouldn't linger here to eat, not even a popkin, if I were you. I wouldn't take a drink, either. You'll want a clear head to deal with this one."

"Free with your advice today, ain't you, Roy?" Jonas said. He spoke in a heavily sarcastic tone, but when Pettie brought him a tot of whiskey, he sent it back and

asked for water instead. Roy had a bit of a look to him, Jonas decided. Too pale by half, was good old Roy. And when Sheb sat down at his piano-bench and struck a chord, Depape jerked in that direction, one hand dropping to the butt of his gun. Interesting. And a little disquieting.

"Spill it, son—what's got your back hair up?"

Roy shook his head sullenly. "Don't rightly know."

"What's this fellow's name?"

"I didn't ask, he didn't say. He showed me Farson's *sigul*, though. You know."

Depape lowered his voice a little. "The eye."

Jonas knew, all right. He hated that wide-open staring eye, couldn't imagine what had possessed Farson to pick it in the first place. Why not a mailed fist? Crossed swords? Or a bird? A falcon, for instance—a falcon would have made a fine *sigul*. But that *eye*—

"All right," he said, finishing the glass of water. It went down better than whiskey would have done, anyway—dry as a bone, he'd been. "I'll find out the rest for myself, shall I?"

As he reached the batwing doors and pushed them open, Depape called his name. Jonas turned back.

"He looks like other people," Depape said. "What do you mean?"

"I don't hardly know." Depape looked embarrassed and bewildered... but dogged, too. Sticking to his guns. "We only talked five minutes in all, but once I looked at him and thought it was the old bastard from Ritzy—the one I shot. Little bit later I th'ow him a glance and think, 'Hellfire, it's my old pa standin there.' Then that went by, too, and he looked like him-self again."

"And how's that?"

"You'll see for yourself, I reckon. I don't know if you'll like it much, though."

Jonas stood with one batwing pushed open, thinking. "Roy, 'twasn't Farson himself, was it? The Good Man in some sort of disguise?" Depape hesitated, frowning, and then shook his head. "No." "Are you sure? We only saw him the once, remember, and not close-to." Latigo had pointed him out. Sixteen months ago that had been, give or take.

"I'm sure. You remember how big he was?"

Jonas nodded. Farson was no Lord Perth, but he was six feet or more, and broad across at both brace and basket.

"This man's Clay's height, or less. And he stays the same height no matter who he looks like." Depape hesitated a moment and said: "He laughs like a dead person. I could barely stand to hear him do it."

"What do you mean, like a dead person?"

Roy Depape shook his head. "Can't rightly say."

13

Twenty minutes later, Eldred Jonas was riding beneath come in peace mid into the courtyard of Seafront, uneasy because he had expected Latigo . . . and unless Roy was very much mistaken, it wasn't Latigo he was getting.

Miguel shuffled forward, grinning his gummy old grin, and took the reins of Jonas's horse.

*"Reconocimiento."*

*"Por nada, jefe."*

Jonas went in, saw Olive Thorin sitting in the front parlor like a for-lorn ghost, and nodded to her. She nodded back, and managed a wan smile.

"Sai Jonas, how well you look. If you see Hart—"

"Cry your pardon, lady, but it's the Chancellor I've come to see," Jonas said. He went on quickly upstairs toward the Chancellor's suite of rooms, then down a narrow stone hall lit (and not too well) with gas-jets.

When he reached the end of the corridor, he rapped on the door wait-ing there—a massive thing of oak and brass set in its own arch. Rimer didn't care for such as Susan Delgado, but he loved the trappings of power; that was what took the curve out of his noodle and made it straight. Jonas rapped.

"Come in, my friend," a voice—not Rimer's—called. It was followed by a tittery laugh that made Jonas's flesh creep. *He laughs like a dead person*, Roy had said. Jonas pushed open the door and stepped in. Rimer cared for incense no more than he cared for the hips and lips of women, but there was in-cense burning in here now—a woody smell that made Jonas think of court at Gilead, and functions of state in the Great Hall. The gas-jets were turned high. The draperies—purple velvet, the color of royalty, Rimer's absolute favorite—trembled minutely in the breath of sea breeze coming in through the open windows. Of Rimer there was no sign. Or of anyone else, come to that. There was a little balcony, but the doors

giving on it were open, and no one was out there.

Jonas stepped a little farther into the room, glancing into a gilt-framed mirror on the far side to check behind him without turning his head. No one there, either. Ahead and to the left was a table with places set for two and a cold supper in place, but no one in either chair. Yet someone had spoken to him. Someone who'd been directly on the other side of the door, from the sound. Jonas drew his gun. "Come, now," said the voice which had bid him enter. It came from directly behind Jonas's left shoulder. "No need for that, we're all friends here. All on the same side, you know."

Jonas whirled on his heels, suddenly feeling old and slow. Standing there was a man of medium height, powerfully built from the look of him, with bright blue eyes and the rosy cheeks of either good health or good wine. His parted, smiling lips revealed cunning little teeth which must have been filed to points—surely such points couldn't be natural. He wore a black robe, like the robe of a holy man, with the hood pushed back. Jonas's first thought, that the fellow was bald, had been wrong, he saw. The hair was simply cropped so stringently that it was nothing but fuzz.

"Put the beanshooter away," the man in black said. "We're friends here, I tell you—absolutely palsy-walsy. We'll break bread and speak of many things—oxen and oil-tankers and whether or not Frank Sinatra really *was* a better crooner than Der Bingle."

"Who? A better *what*?"

"No one you know; nothing that matters." The man in black tittered again. It was, Jonas thought, the sort of sound one might expect to hear drifting through the barred windows of a lunatic asylum.

He turned. Looked into the mirror again. This time he saw the man in black standing there and smiling at him, big as life. Gods, had he been there all along? *Yes, but you couldn't see him until he was ready to be seen. I don't know if he's a wizard, but he's a glamor-man, all right. Mayhap even Farson's sorcerer.*

He turned back. The man in the priest's robe was still smiling. No pointed teeth now. But they *had* been pointed. Jonas would lay his watch and warrant on it.

"Where's Rimer?"

"I sent him away to work with young sai Delgado on her Reaping Day catechisms," the man in black said. He slung a chummy arm around Jonas's

shoulders and began leading him toward the table. "Best we palaver alone, I think."

Jonas didn't want to offend Farson's man, but he couldn't bear the touch of that arm. He couldn't say why, but it was unbearable. Pestilential. He shrugged it off and went on to one of the chairs, trying not to shiver. No wonder Depape had come back from Hanging Rock looking pale. No damned wonder.

Instead of being offended, the man in black tittered again (*Yes, Jonas thought, he does laugh like the dead, very like, so he does*). For one moment Jonas thought it was Fardo, Cort's father, in this room with him—that it was the man who had sent him west all those years ago—and he reached for his gun again. Then it was just the man in black, smiling at him in an unpleasantly knowing way, those blue eyes dancing like the flame from the gas-jets.

"See something interesting, sai Jonas?"

"Aye," Jonas said, sitting down. "Eats." He took a piece of bread and popped it into his mouth. The bread stuck to his dry tongue, but he chewed determinedly all the same.

"Good boy." The other also sat, and poured wine, filling Jonas's glass first. "Now, my friend, tell me everything you've done since the three troublesome boys arrived, and everything you know, and everything you have planned. I would not have you leave out a single jot."

"First show me your *sigul*."

"Of course. How prudent you are."

The man in black reached inside his robe and brought out a square of metal—silver, Jonas guessed. He tossed it onto the table, and it clattered across to Jonas's plate. Engraved on it was what he had expected—that hideous staring eye.

"Satisfied?"

Jonas nodded.

"Slide it back to me."

Jonas reached for it, but for once his normally steady hand resembled his reedy, unstable voice. He watched the fingers tremble for a moment, then lowered the hand quickly to the table.

"I... I don't want to."

No. He didn't want to. Suddenly he knew that if he touched it, the engraved silver eye would roll... and look directly at him.



The man in black tittered and made a come-along gesture with the fingers of his right hand. The silver buckle (that was what it looked like to Jonas) slid back to him . . . and up the sleeve of his homespun robe.

"Abracadabra! Bool! The end! Now," the man in black went on, sipping his wine delicately, "if we have finished the tiresome formalities..."

"One more," Jonas said. "You know my name; I would know yours."

"Call me Walter," the man in black said, and the smile suddenly fell off his lips.

"Good old Walter, that's me. Now let us see where we are, and where we're going. Let us, in short, palaver."

## 14

When Cuthbert came back into the bunkhouse, night had fallen. Roland and Alain were playing cards. They had cleaned the place up so that it looked almost as it had (thanks to turpentine found in a closet of the old foreman's office, even the slogans written on the walls were just pink ghosts of their former selves), and now were deeply involved in a game of *Casa Fuerte*, or Hotpatch, as it was known in their own part of the world. Either way, it was basically a two-man version of Watch Me, the card-game which had been played in barrooms and bunkhouses and around campfires since the world was young.

Roland looked up at once, trying to read Bert's emotional weather. Outwardly, Roland was as impassive as ever, had even played Alain to a draw across four difficult hands, but inwardly he was in a turmoil of pain and indecision. Alain had told him what Cuthbert had said while the two of them stood talking in the yard, and they were terrible things to hear from a friend, even when they came at second hand. Yet what haunted him more was what Bert had said just before leaving: *You've called your carelessness love and made a virtue of irresponsibility.* Was there even a *chance* he had done such a thing? Over and over he told himself no—that the course he had ordered them to follow was hard but sensible, the only course that made sense. Cuthbert's shouting was just so much angry wind, brought on by nerves . . . and his fury at having their private place defiled so outrageously. Still. . .

*Tell him he's right for the -wrong reasons, and that makes him all the way wrong.* That couldn't be.

Could it?

Cuthbert was smiling and his color was high, as if he had galloped most of the way back. He looked young, handsome, and vital. He looked happy, in fact, almost like the Cuthbert of old—the one who'd been capable of babbling happy nonsense to a rook's skull until someone told him to please, *please* shut up. But Roland didn't trust what he saw. There was something wrong with the smile, the color in Bert's cheeks could have been anger rather than good health, and the sparkle in his eyes looked like fever instead of humor. Roland showed nothing on his own face, but his heart sank. He'd hoped the storm would blow itself out, given a little time, but he didn't think it had. He shot a glance at Alain, and saw that Alain felt the same.

*Cuthbert, it will be over in three weeks. If only I could tell you that.*

The thought which returned was stunning in its simplicity: *Why can't you?*

He realized he didn't know. Why had he been holding back, keeping his own counsel? For *what purpose?* Had he been blind? Gods, *had* he?

"Hello, Bert," he said, "did you have a nice r—"

"Yes, very nice, a very nice ride, an *instructive* ride. Come outside. I want to show you something."

Roland liked the thin glaze of hilarity in Bert's eyes less and less, but he laid his cards in a neat facedown fan on the table and got up.

Alain pulled at his sleeve. "No!" His voice was low and panicky. "Do you not see how he looks?"

"I see," Roland said. And felt dismay in his heart.

For the first time, as he walked slowly toward the friend who no longer looked like a friend, it occurred to Roland that he had been making decisions in a state close akin to drunkenness. Or had he been making decisions at all? He was no longer sure.

"What is it you'd show me, Bert?"

"Something wonderful," Bert said, and laughed. There was hate in the sound.

Perhaps murder. "You'll want a good close look at this. I know you will."

"Bert, what's wrong with you?" Alain asked.

"Wrong with me? Nothing wrong with *me*, Al—I'm as happy as a dart at sunrise, a bee in a flower, a fish in the ocean." And as he turned away to go back through the door, he laughed again.

"Don't go out there," Alain said. "He's lost his wits."

"If our fellowship is broken, any chance we might have of getting out of Mejis alive is gone," Roland said. "That being the case, I'd rather die at the hands of a friend than an enemy."

He went out. After a moment of hesitation, Alain followed. On his face was a look of purest misery.

## 15

Huntress had gone and Demon had not yet begun to show his face, but the sky was powdered with stars, and they threw enough light to see by. Cuthbert's horse, still saddled, was tied to the hitching rail. Beyond it, the square of dusty dooryard gleamed like a canopy of tarnished silver.

"What is it?" Roland asked. They weren't wearing guns, any of them. That was to be grateful for, at least. "What would you show me?"

"It's here." Cuthbert stopped at a point midway between the bunk-house and the charred remains of the home place. He pointed with great assurance, but Roland could see nothing out of the ordinary. He walked over to Cuthbert and looked down.

"I don't see—"

Brilliant light—starshine times a thousand—exploded in his head as Cuthbert's fist drove against the point of his chin. It was the first time, except in play (and as very small boys), that Bert had ever struck him. Roland didn't lose consciousness, but he *did* lose control over his arms and legs. They were there, but seemingly in another country, flailing like the limbs of a rag doll. He went down on his back. Dust puffed up around him. The stars seemed strangely in motion, running in arcs and leaving milky trails behind them. There was a high ringing in his ears.

From a great distance he heard Alain scream: "Oh, you fool! You stupid fool!"

By making a tremendous effort, Roland was able to turn his head. He saw Alain start toward him and saw Cuthbert, no longer smiling, push him away. "This is between us, Al. You stay out of it."

"You sucker-punched him, you bastard!" Alain, slow to anger, was now building toward a rage Cuthbert might well regret. *I have to get up*, Roland thought. *I have to get between them before something even worse happens.* His arms and legs

began to swim weakly in the dust.

"Yes—that's how he's played us," Cuthbert said. "I only returned the favor." He looked down. "That's what I wanted to show you, Roland.

That particular piece of ground. That particular puff of dust in which you are now lying. Get a good taste of it. Mayhap it'll wake you up."

Now Roland's own anger began to rise. He felt the coldness that was seeping into his thoughts, fought it, and realized he was losing. Jonas ceased to matter; the tankers at Citgo ceased to matter; the supply con-spiracy they had uncovered ceased to matter. Soon the Affiliation and the *ka-tet* he had been at such pains to preserve would cease to matter as well.

The surface numbness was leaving his feet and legs, and he pushed himself to a sitting position. He looked up calmly at Bert, his tented hands on the ground, his face set. Starshine swam in his eyes.

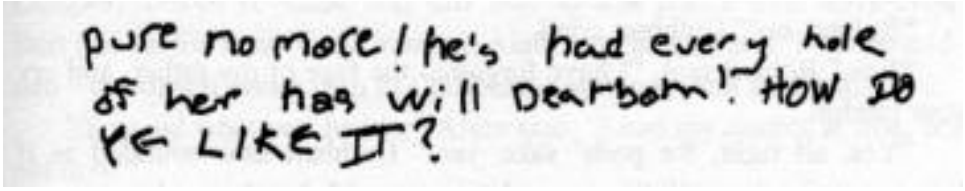
"I love you, Cuthbert, but I'll have no more insubordination and jeal-ous tantrums. If I paid you back for all, I reckon you'd finish in pieces, so I'm only going to pay you for hitting me when I didn't know it was coming."

"And I've no doubt ye can, cully," Cuthbert said, falling effortlessly into the Hambry patois. "But first ye might want to have a peek at this." Almost contemptuously, he tossed a folded sheet of paper. It hit Roland's chest and bounced into his lap.

Roland picked it up, feeling the fine point of his developing rage lose its edge. "What is it?"

"Open and see. There's enough starlight to read by."

Slowly, with reluctant fingers, Roland unfolded the sheet of paper and read what was printed there.



pure no more! he's had every hole  
of her has will death! HOW DO  
YE LIKE IT?

He read it twice. The second time was actually harder, because his hands had begun to tremble. He saw every place he and Susan had met—the boathouse, the hut, the shack—and now he saw them in a new light, knowing someone else had seen them, too. How clever he had believed they were being. How confident of

their secrecy and their discretion. And yet someone had been watching all the time. Susan had been right. Some-one had seen.

*I've put everything at risk. Her life as well as our lives.*

*Tell him what I said about the doorway to hell.*

And Susan's voice, too: *Ka like a wind . . . if you love me, then love me.*

So he had done, believing in his youthful arrogance that everything would turn out all right for no other reason—yes, at bottom he had believed this—than that *he* was *he*, and *ka* must serve his love.

"I've been a fool," he said. His voice trembled like his hands.

"Yes, indeed," Cuthbert said. "So you have." He dropped to his knees in the dust, facing Roland. "Now if you want to hit me, hit away. Hard as you want and as many as you can manage. I'll not hit back. I've done all I can to wake you up to your responsibilities. If you still sleep, so be it. Either way, I still love you." Bert put his hands on Roland's shoulders and briefly kissed his friend's cheek.

Roland began to cry. They were partly tears of gratitude, but mostly those of mingled shame and confusion; there was even a small, dark part of him that hated Cuthbert and always would. That part hated Cuthbert more on account of the kiss than because of the unexpected punch on the jaw; more for the forgiveness than the awakening.

He got to his feet, still holding the letter in one dusty hand, the other ineffectually brushing his cheeks and leaving damp smears there. When he staggered and Cuthbert put out a hand to steady him, Roland pushed him so hard that Cuthbert himself would have fallen, if Alain hadn't caught hold of his shoulders.

Then, slowly, Roland went back down again—this time in front of Cuthbert with his hands up and his head down.

"Roland, no!" Cuthbert cried.

"Yes," Roland said. "I have forgotten the face of my father, and cry your pardon."

"Yes, all right, for gods' sake, *yes!*" Cuthbert now sounded as if he were crying himself. "Just... please get up! It breaks my heart to see you so!"

*And mine to be so, Roland thought. To be humbled so. But I brought it on myself, didn't I? This dark yard, with my head throbbing and my heart full of shame and fear. This is mine, bought and paid for.*

They helped him up and Roland let himself be helped. "That's quite a left, Bert," he said in a voice that almost passed for normal.

"Only when it's going toward someone who doesn't know it's coming," Cuthbert replied.

"This letter—how did you come by it?"

Cuthbert told of meeting Sheemie, who had been dithering along in his own misery, as if waiting for *ka* to intervene ... and, in the person of "Arthur Heath," *ka* had.

"From the witch," Roland mused. "Yes, but how did *she* know? For she never leaves the Coos, or so Susan has told me."

"I can't say. Nor do I much care. What I'm most concerned about right now is making sure that Sheemie isn't hurt because of what he told me and gave me. After that, I'm concerned that what old witch Rhea has tried to tell once she doesn't try to tell again."

"I've made at least one terrible mistake," Roland said, "but I don't count loving Susan as another. That was beyond me to change. As it was beyond her. Do you believe that?"

"Yes," Alain said at once, and after a moment, almost reluctantly, Cuthbert said, "Aye, Roland."

"I've been arrogant and stupid. If this note had reached her aunt, she could have been sent into exile."

"And we to the devil, by way of hangropes," Cuthbert added dryly. "Although I know that's a minor matter to you by comparison."

"What about the witch?" Alain asked. "What do we do about her?" Roland smiled a little, and turned toward the northwest. "Rhea," he said. "Whatever else she is, she's a first-class troublemaker, is she not? And troublemakers must be put on notice."

He started back toward the bunkhouse, trudging with his head down. Cuthbert looked at Alain, and saw that Al was also a little teary-eyed. Bert put out his hand. For a moment Alain only looked at it. Then he nodded—to himself rather than to Cuthbert, it seemed—and shook it.

"You did what you had to," Alain said. "I had my doubts at first, but not now." Cuthbert let out his breath. "And I did it the way I had to. If I hadn't surprised him—"

"—he would have beaten you black and blue."

"So many more colors than that," Cuthbert said. "I would have looked like a

rainbow."

"The Wizard's Rainbow, even," Alain said. "Extra colors for your penny."

That made Cuthbert laugh. The two of them walked back toward the bunkhouse, where Roland was unsaddling Bert's horse.

Cuthbert turned in that direction to help, but Alain held him back. "Leave him alone for a little while," he said. "It's best you do."

They went on ahead, and when Roland came in ten minutes later, he found Cuthbert playing his hand. And winning with it.

"Bert," he said.

Cuthbert looked up.

"We have a spot of business tomorrow, you and I. Up on the Coos." "Are we going to kill her?"

Roland thought, and thought hard. At last he looked up, biting his lip. "We should."

"Aye. We should. But are we going to?"

"Not unless we have to, I reckon." Later he would regret this decision—if it was a decision—bitterly, but there never came a time when he did not understand it. He had been a boy not much older than Jake Chambers during that Mejis fall, and the decision to kill does not come easily or naturally to most boys. "Not unless she makes us."

"Perhaps it would be best if she did," Cuthbert said. It was hard gunslinger talk, but he looked troubled as he said it.

"Yes. Perhaps it would. It's not likely, though, not in one as sly as her. Be ready to get up early."

"All right. Do you want your hand back?"

"When you're on the verge of knocking him out? Not at all."

Roland went past them to his bunk. There he sat, looking at his folded hands in his lap. He might have been praying; he might only have been thinking hard. Cuthbert looked at him for a moment, then turned back to his cards.

The sun was just over the horizon when Roland and Cuthbert left the next morning. The Drop, still drenched with morning dew, seemed to bum with orange

fire in the early light. Their breath and that of their horses puffed frosty in the air. It was a morning neither of them ever forgot. For the first time in their lives they went forth wearing bolstered revolvers; for the first time in their lives they went into the world as gunslingers.

Cuthbert said not a word—he knew that if he started, he'd do nothing but babble great streams of his usual nonsense—and Roland was quiet by nature. There was only one exchange between them, and it was brief.

"I said I made at least one very bad mistake," Roland told him. "One that this note"—he touched his breast pocket—"brought home to me. Do you know what that mistake was?"

"Not loving her—not that," Cuthbert said. "You called that *ka*, and I call it the same." It was a relief to be able to say this, and a greater one to believe it. Cuthbert thought he could even accept Susan herself now, not us his best friend's lover, a girl he had wanted himself the first time he saw her, but as a part of their entwined fate.

"No," Roland said. "Not loving her, but thinking that love could somehow be apart from everything else. That I could live two lives—one with you and Al and our job here, one with her. I thought that love could lilt me above *ka*, the way a bird's wings can take it above all the things that would kill it and eat it, otherwise. Do you understand?"

"It made you blind." Cuthbert spoke with a gentleness quite foreign to the young man who had suffered through the last two months.

"Yes," Roland said sadly. "It made me blind . . . but now I see. Come on, a little faster, if you please. I want to get this over."

## 17

They rode up the ruddy cart-track along which Susan (a Susan who had known a good deal less about the ways of the world) had come singing "Careless Love" beneath the light of the Kissing Moon. Where the track opened into Rhea's yard, they stopped.

"Wonderful view," Roland murmured. "You can see the whole sweep of the desert from here."

"Not much to say about the view right here in front of us, though."



That was true. The garden was full of unpicked mutie vegetables, the stuffy-guy presiding over them either a bad joke or a bad omen. The yard supported just one tree, now moulting sickly-looking fall leaves like an old vulture shedding its feathers. Beyond the tree was the hut itself, made of rough stone and topped by a single sooty pot of a chimney with a hex-sign painted on it in sneering yellow. At the rear comer, beyond one over-grown window, was a woodpile.

Roland had seen plenty of huts like it—the three of them had passed any number on their way here from Gilead—but never one that felt as powerfully *wrong* as this. He saw nothing untoward, yet there was a feel-ing, too strong to be denied, of a presence. One that watched and waited.

Cuthbert felt it, too. "Do we have to go closer?" lie swallowed. "Do we have to go in? Because . . . Roland, the door is open. Do you see?"

He saw. As if she expected them. As if she was inviting them in, wanting them to sit down with her to some unspeakable breakfast.

"Stay here." Roland gigged Rusher forward.

"No! I'm coming!"

"No, cover my back. If I need to go inside, I'll call you to join me ... but if I need to go inside, the old woman who lives here will breathe no more. As you said, that might be for the best."

At every slow step Rusher took, the feeling of wrongness grew in Roland's heart and mind. There was a stench to the place, a smell like rot-ten meat and hot putrefied tomatoes. It came from the hut, he supposed, but it also seemed to come wafting out of the very ground. And at every step, the whine of the thinny seemed louder, as if the atmosphere of this place somehow magnified it.

*Susan came up here alone, and in the dark, he thought. Gods, I'm not sure I could have come up here in the dark with my friends for company.*

He stopped beneath the tree, looking through the open door twenty paces away. He saw what could have been a kitchen; the legs of a table, the back of a chair, a filthy hearthstone. No sign of the lady of the house. But she was there. Roland could feel her eyes crawling on him like loath-some bugs.

*I can't see her because she's used her art to make herself dim... but she's there.*

And just perhaps he *did* see her. The air had a strange shimmer just inside the door to the right, as if it had been heated. Roland had been told that you could see someone who was *dim* by turning your head and look-ing from the comer of your

eye. He did that now.

"Roland?" Cuthbert called from behind him.

"Fine so far, Bert." Barely paying attention to the words he was say-ing, because ... yes! That shimmer was clearer now, and it had almost the shape of a woman. It could be his imagination, of course, but...

But at that moment, as if understanding he'd seen her, the shimmer moved farther back into the shadows. Roland glimpsed the swinging hem of an old black dress, there and then gone.

No matter. He had not come to see her but only to give her her single warning . . . which was one more than any of their fathers would have given her, no doubt.

"Rhea!" His voice rolled in the harsh tones of old, stem and commanding. Two yellow leaves fell from the tree, as if shivered loose by that voice, and one fell in his black hair. From the hut came only a waiting, listen-ing silence . . . and then the discordant, jeering yowl of a cat.

"Rhea, daughter of none! I've brought something back to you, woman! Something you must have lost!" From his shirt he took the folded letter and tossed it to the stony ground. "Today I've been your friend, Rhea—if this had gone where you had intended it to go, you would have paid with your life."

He paused. Another leaf drifted down from the tree. This one landed in Pusher's mane.

"Hear me well, Rhea, daughter of none, and understand me well. I have come here under the name of Will Dearborn, but Dearborn is not my name and it is the Affiliation I serve. More, 'tis all which lies behind the Affiliation—'tis the power of the White. You have crossed the way of our *ka*, and I warn you only this once: *do not cross it again*. Do you understand?"

Only that waiting silence.

"Do not touch a single hair on the head of the boy who carried your had-natured mischief hence, or you'll die. Speak not another word of those things you know or think you know to anyone—not to Cordelia Delgado, nor to Jonas, nor to Rimer, nor to Thorin—or you'll die. Keep your peace and we will keep ours. Break it, and we'll still you. Do you understand?"

More silence. Dirty windows peering at him like eyes. A puff of breeze sent more leaves showering down around him, and caused the stuffy-guy to creak nastily on his pole. Roland thought briefly of the cook, Hax, twisting at the end of his rope.

"Do you understand?"

No reply. Not even a shimmer could he see through the open door now.

"Very well," Roland said. "Silence gives consent." He gigged his horse around. As he did, his head came up a little, and he saw something green shift above him among the yellow leaves. There was a low hissing sound.

*"Roland look out! Snake!"* Cuthbert screamed, but before the second word had left his mouth, Roland had drawn one of his guns.

He fell sideways in the saddle, holding with his left leg and heel as Rusher jiggled and pranced. He fired three times, the thunder of the big gun smashing through the still air and then rolling back from the nearby hills. With each shot the snake flipped upward again, its blood dotting red across a background of blue sky and yellow leaves. The last bullet tore off its head, and when the snake fell for good, it hit the ground in two pieces. From within the hut came a wail of grief and rage so awful that Roland's spine turned to a cord of ice.

*"You bastard!"* screamed a woman's voice from the shadows. *"Oh, you murdering cull! My friend! My friend!"*

"If it was your friend, you oughtn't to have set it on me," Roland said. "Remember, Rhea, daughter of none."

The voice uttered one more shriek and fell silent. Roland rode back to Cuthbert, bolstering his gun. Bert's eyes were round and amazed. "Roland, what shooting! Gods, what shooting!" "Let's get out of here."

"But we still don't know how she knew!"

"Do you think she'd tell?" There was a small but minute shake in Roland's voice. The way the snake had come out of the tree like that, right at him ... he could still barely believe he wasn't dead. Thank gods for his hand, which had taken matters over.

"We could make her talk," Cuthbert said, but Roland could tell from his voice that Bert had no taste for such. Maybe later, maybe after years of trail-riding and gunslinging, but now he had no more stomach for torture than for killing outright. "Even if we could, we couldn't make her tell the truth. Such as her lies as other folks breathe. If we've convinced her to keep quiet, we've done enough for today. Come on. I hate this place."

As they rode back toward town, Roland said: "We've got to meet."

"The four of us. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"Yes. I want to tell everything I know and surmise. I want to tell you my plan, such as it is. What we've been *waiting for*."

"That would be very good indeed."

"Susan can help us." Roland seemed to be speaking to himself. Cuthbert was amused to see that the lone, crown like leaf was still caught in his dark hair.

"Susan was *meant* to help us. Why didn't I see that?"

"Because love is blind," Cuthbert said. He snorted laughter and clapped Roland on the shoulder. "Love is blind, old son."

## 19

When she was sure the boys were gone, Rhea crept out of her door and into the hateful sunshine. She hobbled across to the tree and fell on her knees by the tattered length of her snake, weeping loudly.

"Ermot, Ermot!" she cried. "See what's become of ye!"

There was his head, the mouth frozen open, the double fangs still dripping poison—clear drops that shone like prisms in the day's strength-ening light. The glazing eyes glared. She picked Ermot up, kissed the scaly mouth, licked the last of the venom from the exposed needles, crooning and weeping all the while.

Next she picked up the long and tattered body with her other hand, moaning at the holes which had been torn into Ermot's satiny hide; the holes and the ripped red flesh beneath. Twice she put the head against the body and spoke incantations, but nothing happened. Of course not. Ermot had gone beyond the aid of her spells.

Poor Ermot.

She held his head to one flattened old dug, and his body to the other. Then, with the last of his blood wetting the bodice of her dress, she looked in the direction the hateful boys had gone.

"I'll pay ye back," she whispered. "By all the gods that ever were, I'll pay ye back. When ye least expect it, there Rhea will be, and your screams will break your throats. Do you hear me? *Your screams will break your throats!*"

She knelt a moment longer, then got up and shuffled back toward her hut, holding

Ermot to her bosom.

## CHAPTER V

### wizard's rainbow

1

On an afternoon three days after Roland's and Cuthbert's visit to the Coos, Roy Depape and Clay Reynolds walked along the upstairs hallway of the Travellers' Rest to the spacious bedroom Coral Thorin kept there. Clay knocked. Jonas called for them to come in, it was open.

The first thing Depape saw upon entering was sai Thorin herself, in a rocker by the window. She wore a foamy nightdress of white silk and a red *bufanda* on her head. She had a lapful of knitting. Depape looked at her in surprise. She offered him and Reynolds an enigmatic smile, said "Hello, gents," and returned to her needlework. Outside there was a rattle of firecrackers (young folks could never wait until the big day; if they had crackers in their hands, they had to set match to them), the nervous whinny of a horse, and the raucous laughter of boys.

Depape turned to Reynolds, who shrugged and then crossed his arms to hold the sides of his cloak. In this way he expressed doubt or disap-proval or both.

"Problem?"

Jonas was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, wiping shaving soap from his face with the end of the towel laid over his shoulder. He was bare to the waist. Depape had seen him that way plenty of times, but the old white crisscrossings of scars always made him feel a little sick to his stomach.

"Well... I knew we was using the lady's room, I just didn't know the lady came with it."

"She does." Jonas tossed the towel into the bathroom, crossed to the bed, and took his shirt from where it hung on one of the footposts. Beyond him, Coral glanced up, gave his naked back a single greedy look, then went back to her work once more. Jonas slipped into his shirt. "How are things at Citgo, Clay?"

"Quiet. But it'll get noisy if certain young *vagabundos* poke their nosy noses in." "How many are out there, and how do they set?" "Ten in the days. A dozen at night. Roy or I are out once every shift, but like I say, it's been quiet."

Jonas nodded, but he wasn't happy. He'd hoped to draw the boys out to Citgo before now, just as he'd hoped to draw them into a confrontation by vandalizing their place and killing their pigeons. Yet so far they still hid behind their damned Hillock. He felt like a man in a field with three young bulls. He's got a red rag, this would-be *torero*, and he's napping it for all he's worth, and still the *toros* refuse to charge. Why? "The moving operation? How goes that?"

"Like clockwork," Reynolds said. "Four tankers a night, in pairs, the last four nights. Renfrew's in charge, him of the Lazy Susan. Do you still want to leave half a dozen as bait?"

"Yar," Jonas said, and there was a knock at the door. Depape jumped. "Is that—"

"No," Jonas said. "Our friend in the black robe has decamped. Perhaps he goes to offer comfort to the Good Man's troops before battle."

Depape barked laughter at that. By the window, the woman in the nightgown looked down at her knitting and said nothing. "It's open!" Jonas called.

The man who stepped in was wearing the *sombrero*, *scrape*, and *sandalias* of a farmer or *vaquero*, but the face was pale and the lock of hair peeking out from beneath the *sombrero's* brim was blond. It was Latigo. A hard man and no mistake, but a great improvement over the laughing man in the black robe, just the same.

"Good to see you, gentlemen," he said, coming in and closing the door. His face—dour, frowning—was that of a man who hasn't seen anything good in years. Maybe since birth. "Jonas? Are you well? Do things march?"

"I am and they do," Jonas said. He offered his hand. Latigo gave it a quick, dry shake. He didn't do the same for Depape or Reynolds, but glanced at Coral instead. "Long days and pleasant nights, lady."

"And may you have twice the number, sai Latigo," she said without looking up from her knitting.

Latigo sat on the end of the bed, produced a sack of tobacco from beneath his *scrape*, and began rolling a cigarette.

"I won't stay long," he said. He spoke in the abrupt, clipped tones of northern In-World, where—or so Depape had heard—reindeer-fucking was still considered the chief sport. If you ran slower than your sister, that was. "It wouldn't be wise. I don't quite fit in, if one looks closely."

"No," Reynolds said, sounding amused. "You don't."

Latigo gave him a sharp glance, then returned his attention to Jonas. "Most of my party is camped thirty wheels from here, in the forest west of Eyebolt Canyon . . . what *is* that wretched noise inside the canyon, by the way? It frightens the horses."

"A thinny," Jonas said.

"It scares the men, too, if they get too close," Reynolds said. "Best to stay away, cap'n."

"How many are you?" Jonas asked.

"A hundred. And well armed."

"So, it's said, were Lord Perth's men."

"Don't be an ass."

"Have they seen any fighting?"

"Enough to know what it is," Latigo said, and Jonas knew he was ly-ing. Farson had kept his veterans in their mountain boltholes. Here was a little expeditionary force where no doubt only the sergeants were able to do more with their cocks than run water through them.

"There are a dozen at Hanging Rock, guarding the tankers your men have brought so far," Latigo said.

"More than needed, likely."

"I didn't risk coming into this godforsaken shitsplat of a town in order to discuss my arrangements with you, Jonas."

"Cry your pardon, sai," Jonas replied, but perfunctorily. He sat on the floor next to Coral's rocker and began to roll a smoke of his own. She put her knitting aside and began to stroke his hair. Depape didn't know what there was about her that Eldred found so fascinating—when he himself looked he saw only an ugly bitch with a big nose and mosquito-bump tittles.

"As to the three young men," Latigo said with the air of a fellow going directly to the heart of the matter. "The Good Man was extremely disturbed to learn there were visitors from In-World in Mejis. And now you tell me they aren't what they claim to be. So, just what *are* they?"

Jonas brushed Coral's hand away from his hair as though it were a troublesome insect. Undisturbed, she returned to her knitting. "They're not young men but mere boys, and if their coming here is *ka*—about which I know Farson concerns himself deeply—then it may be our *ka* rather than the Affiliation's."

"Unfortunately, we'll have to forgo enlightening the Good Man with your theological conclusions," Latigo said. "We've brought radios, but they're either broken or can't work at this distance. No one knows which. I hate all such toys, anyway. The gods laugh at them. We're on our own, my friend. For good or ill."

"No need for Farson to worry unnecessarily," Jonas said. "The Good Man wants these lads treated as a threat to his plans. I expect Walter told you the same thing."

"Aye. And I haven't forgotten a word. Sai Walter is an unforgettable sort of man."

"Yes," Latigo agreed. "He's the Good Man's underliner. The chief reason he came to you was to underline these boys."

"And so he did. Roy, tell sai Latigo about your visit to the Sheriff day before yesterday."

Depape cleared his throat nervously. "The sheriff . . . Avery—"

"I know him, fat as a pig in Full Earth, he is," Latigo said. "Go on." "One of Avery's deputies carried a message to the three boys as they counted horse on the Drop." "What message?"

"Stay out of town on Reaping Day; stay off the Drop on Reaping Day; best to stay close to your quarters on Reaping Day, as Barony folk don't enjoy seeing outlanders, even those they like, when they keep their festivals."

"And how did they take it?"

"They agreed straight away to keep to themselves on Reaping," Depape said.

"That's been their habit all along, to be just as agreeable as pie when something's asked of em. They know better, course they do—there's no more a custom here against outlanders on Reaping than there is any-place else. In fact, it's quite usual to make strangers a part of the merry-making, as I'm sure the boys know. The idea—"



"—is to make them believe we plan to move on Fair-Day itself, yes, yes," Latigo finished impatiently. "What I want to know is *are* they con-vinced? Can you take them on the day *before* Reaping, as you've promised, or will they be waiting?" Depape and Reynolds looked at Jonas. Jonas reached behind him and put his hand on Coral's narrow but not uninteresting thigh. Here it was, he thought. He would be held to what he said next, and without grace. If he was right, the Big Coffin Hunters would be thanked and paid ... perhaps bonused, as well. If he was wrong, they would likely be hung so high and hard that their heads would pop off when they hit the end of the rope.

"We'll take them easy as birds on the ground," Jonas said. "Treason the charge. Three young men, all high-bom, in the pay of John Parson. Shocking stuff. What could be more indicative of the evil days we live in?"

"One cry of treason and the mob appears?"

Jonas favored Latigo with a wintry smile. "As a concept, treason might be a bit of a reach for the common folk, even when the mob's drunk and the core's been bought and paid for by the Horsemen's Association. Murder, though . . . especially that of a much loved Mayor—"

Depape's startled eyes flew to the Mayor's sister.

"What a pity it will be," that lady said, and sighed. "I may be moved to lead the rabble myself."

Depape thought he finally understood Eldred's attraction: here was a woman every bit as cold-blooded as Jonas himself.

"One other matter," Latigo said. "A piece of the Good Man's prop-erty was sent with you for safekeeping. A certain glass ball?"

Jonas nodded. "Yes, indeed. A pretty trifle."

"I understand you left it with the local *bruja*."

"Yes."

"You should take it back. Soon."

"Don't teach your grandpa to suck eggs," Jonas said, a bit testily. "I'm waiting until the brats are jugged."

Reynolds murmured curiously, "Have you seen it yourself, sai Latigo?"

"Not close up, but I've seen men who have." Latigo paused. "One such ran mad and had to be shot. The only other time I saw anyone in such condition was thirty years ago, on the edge of the big desert. 'Twas a hut-dweller who'd been bitten by

a rabid coyote."

"Bless the Turtle," Reynolds muttered, and tapped his throat three times. He was terrified of rabies.

"You won't bless anything if the Wizard's Rainbow gets hold of you," Latigo said grimly, and swung his attention back to Jonas. "You'll want to be even more careful taking it back than you were in giving it over. The old witch-woman's likely under its glam by now."

"I intend to send Rimer and Avery. Avery ain't much of a shake, but Rimer's a trig boy."

"I'm afraid that won't do," Latigo said.

"Won't it?" Jonas said. His hand tightened on Coral's leg and he smiled unpleasantly at Latigo. "Perhaps you could tell your 'umble ser-vant *why* it won't do?"

It was Coral who answered. "Because," said she, "when the piece of the Wizard's Rainbow Rhea holds is taken back into custody, the Chan-cellor will be busy accompanying my brother to his final resting place."

"What's she talking about, Eldred?" Depape asked.

"That Rimer dies, too," Jonas said. He began to grin. "Another foul crime to lay at the feet of John Farson's filthy spyboys."

Coral smiled in sweet agreement, put her hands over Jonas's, moved it higher on her thigh, and then picked up her knitting again.

## 2

The girl, although young, was married.

The boy, although fair, was unstable.

She met him one night in a remote place to tell him their affair, sweet as it had been, must end. He replied that it would never end, it was written in the stars. She told him that might be, but at some point the constellations had changed. Perhaps he began to weep. Perhaps she laughed—out of nervousness, very likely.

Whatever the cause, such laughter was disastrously timed. He picked up a stone and dashed out her brains with it. Then, coming to his senses and realizing what he had done, he sat down with his back against a granite slab, drew her poor battered head into his lap, and cut his own throat as an owl looked on from a nearby tree.

He died covering her face with kisses, and when they were found, their lips were sealed together with his life's blood and with hers.

An old story. Every town has its version. The site is usually the local lovers' lane, or a secluded stretch of riverbank, or the town graveyard. Once the details of what actually happened have been distorted enough to please the morbidly romantic, songs are made. These are usually sung by yearning virgins who play guitar or mando badly and cannot quite stay on key. Choruses tend to include such lachrymose refrains as *My-di-I-de-I-de-o, There they died together-o*.

The Hambry version of this quaint tale featured lovers named Robert and Francesca, and had happened in the old days, before the world had moved on. The site of the supposed murder-suicide was the Hambry cemetery, the stone with which Francesca's brains had been dashed out was a slate marker, and the granite wall against which Robert had been leaning when he clipped his blowpipe had been the Thorin mausoleum. (It was doubtful there had been any Thorins in Hambry or Mejis five generations back, but folk-tales are, at best, generally no more than lies set in rhyme.)

True or untrue, the graveyard was considered haunted by the ghosts of the lovers, who could be seen (it was said) walking hand-in-hand among the markers, covered with blood and looking wistful. It was thus seldom visited at night, and was a logical spot for Roland, Cuthbert, Alain, and Susan to meet.

By the time the meeting took place, Roland had begun to feel increasingly worried . . . even desperate. Susan was the problem—or, more properly put, Susan's aunt. Even without Rhea's poisonous letter to help the process along, Cordelia's suspicions of Susan and Roland had hardened into a near certainty. On a day less than a week before the meeting in the cemetery, Cordelia had begun shrieking at Susan almost as soon as she stepped through the house door with her basket over her arm.

"Ye've been with him! Ye have, ye bad girl, it's written all over yer face!"

Susan, who had that day been nowhere near Roland, could at first only gape at her aunt. "Been with who?"

"Oh, be not coy with me, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty! Be not coy, I pray! Who does all but wiggle his tongue at ye when he passes our door? Dearborn, that's who! Dearborn! Dearborn! I'll say it a thousand times! Oh, shame on ye! Shame! Look at yer trousers! Green from the grass the two of ye have been rolling in, they

are! I'm surprised they're not torn open at the crutch as well!" By then Aunt Cord had been nearly shrieking. The veins in her neck stood out like rope.

Susan, bemused, had looked down at the old khaki pants she was wearing. "Aunt, it's paint—don't you see it is? Chetta and I've been making Fair-Day decorations up at Mayor's House. What's on my bottom got there when Hart Thorin- not Dearborn but *Thorin*—came upon me in the shed where the decorations and fireworks are stored. He decided it was as good a time and place as any to have another little wrestle. He got on top of me, shot his squirt into his pants again, and went off happy. Humming, he was." She wrinkled her nose, although the most she felt for Thorin these days was a kind of sad distaste. Her fear of him had passed.

Aunt Cord, meanwhile, had been looking at her with glittery eyes. For the first time, Susan found herself wondering consciously about Cordelia's sanity.

"A likely story," Cordelia whispered at last. There were little beads of perspiration above her eyebrows, and the nestles of blue veins at her temples ticked like clocks. She even had a smell, these days, no matter if she bathed or not—a rancid, acrid one. "Did ye work it out together as ye cuddled afterward, thee and him?"

Susan had stepped forward, grabbed her aunt's bony wrist, and clapped it to the stain on one of her knees. Cordelia cried out and tried to pull away, but Susan held fast. She then raised the hand to her aunt's face, holding it there until she knew Cordelia had smelled what was on her palm.

"Does thee smell it. Aunt? Paint! We used it on rice-paper for colored lanterns!" The tension had slowly gone out of the wrist in Susan's hand. The eyes looking into hers regained a measure of clarity. "Aye," she had said at last. "Paint." A pause. "This time."

Since then, Susan had all too often turned her head to see a narrow-hipped figure gliding after her in the street, or one of her aunt's many friends marking her course with suspicious eyes. When she rode on the Drop, she now always had the sensation of being watched. Twice before the four of them came together in the graveyard, she had agreed to meet Roland and his friends. Both times she had been forced to break off, the second at the very last moment. On that occasion she had seen Brian Hockey's eldest son watching her in an odd, intent way. It had only been intuition ... but *strong* intuition.

What made matters worse for her was that she was as frantic for a meeting as

Roland himself, and not just for palaver. She needed to see his face, and to clasp one of his hands between both of hers. The rest, sweet as it was, could wait, but she needed to see him and touch him; needed to make sure he wasn't Just a dream spun by a lonely, frightened girl to comfort herself.

In the end, Maria had helped her—gods bless the little maid, who perhaps understood more than Susan could ever guess. It was Maria who had gone to Cordelia with a note saying that Susan would be spending the night in the guest wing at Seafront. The note was from Olive Thorin, and in spite of all her suspicions, Cordelia could not quite believe it a forgery. As it was not. Olive had written it, listlessly and without questions, when Susan asked.

"What's wrong with my niece?" Cordelia had snapped. "She tired, sai. And with the *dolor de garganta*."

"Sore throat? So close before Fair-Day? Ridiculous! I don't believe it! Susan's never sick!"

"*Dolor de garganta*," Maria repeated, impassive as only a peasant woman can be in the face of disbelief, and with that Cordelia had to be satisfied. Maria herself had no idea what Susan was up to, and that was just the way Susan liked it.

She'd gone over the balcony, moving nimbly down the fifteen feet of tangled vines growing up the north side of the building, and through the rear servants' door in the wall. There Roland had been waiting, and after two warm minutes with which we need not concern ourselves, they rode double on Rusher to the graveyard, where Cuthbert and Alain waited, full of expectation and nervous hope.

### 3

Susan looked first at the placid blond one with the round face, whose name was not Richard Stockworth but Alain Johns. Then at the other one—he from whom she had sensed such doubt of her and perhaps even anger at her. Cuthbert Allgood was his name.

They sat side by side on a fallen gravestone which had been overrun with ivy, their feet in a little brook of mist. Susan slid from Rusher's back and approached them slowly. They stood up. Alain made an In-World bow, leg out, knee locked, heel stiffly planted. "Lady," he said. "Long days—"

Now the other was beside him—thin and dark, with a face that would have been

handsome had it not seemed so restless. His dark eyes were really quite beautiful. "- and pleasant nights," Cuthbert finished, doubling Alain's bow. I he two of them looked so like comic courtiers in a Fair-Day sketch that Susan laughed. She couldn't help herself. Then she curtsied to them deeply, spreading her arms to mime the skirts she wasn't wearing. "And may you have twice the number, gentlemen."

Then they simply looked at each other, three young people who were uncertain exactly how to proceed. Roland didn't help; he sat astride K usher and only watched carefully.

Susan took a tentative step forward, not laughing now. There were still dimples at the comers of her lips, but her eyes were anxious.

"I hope you don't hate me," she said. "I'd understand it if you did—I've come into your plans ... and between the three of you, as well—but I couldn't help it." Her hands were still out at her sides. Now she raised them to Alain and Cuthbert, palms up. "I love him."

"We don't hate you," Alain said. "Do we, Bert?"

For a terrible moment Cuthbert was silent, looking over Susan's shoulder, seeming to study the waxing Demon Moon. She felt her heart stop. Then his gaze returned to her and he gave a smile of such sweetness that a confused but brilliant thought (*If I'd met this one first—*, it began) shot through her mind like a comet.

"Roland's love is my love," Cuthbert said. He reached out, took her hands, and drew her forward so she stood between him and Alain like a sister with her two brothers. "For we have been friends since we wore cradle-clothes, and we'll continue as friends until one of us leaves the path and enters the clearing." Then he grinned like a kid. "Mayhap we'll all find the end of the path together, the way things are going."

"And soon," Alain added.

"Just so long," Susan Delgado finished, "as my Aunt Cordelia doesn't come along as our chaperone."

"We are *ka-tet*," Roland said. "We are one from many."

He looked at each in turn, and saw no disagreement in their eyes. They had

repaired to the mausoleum, and their breath smoked from their mouths and noses. Roland squatted on his hunkers, looking at the other three, who sat in a line on a stone meditation bench flanked by skeletal bouquets in stone pots. The floor was scattered with the petals of dead roses. Cuthbert and Alain, on either side of Susan, had their arms around her in quite unselfconscious fashion. Again Roland thought of one sister and two protective brothers.

"We're greater than we were," Alain said. "I feel that very strongly."

"I do, too," Cuthbert said. He looked around. "And a fine meeting-place, as well. Especially for such a *ka-tet* as ours."

Roland didn't smile; repartee had never been his strong suit. "Let's talk about what's going on in Hambry," he said, "and then we'll talk about the immediate future."

"We weren't sent here on a mission, you know," Alain said to Susan. "We were sent by our fathers to get us out of the way, that's all. Roland excited the enmity of a man who is likely a cohort of John Parson's—"

"'Excited the enmity of,'" Cuthbert said. "That's a good phrase. Round. I intend to remember it and use it at every opportunity."

"Control yourself," Roland said. "I've no desire to be here all night."

"Cry your pardon, O great one," Cuthbert said, but his eyes danced in a decidedly unrepentant way.

"We came with carrier pigeons for the sending and receiving of mes-sages," Alain went on, "but I think the pigeons were laid on so our parents could be sure we were all right."

"Yes," Cuthbert said. "What Alain's trying to say is that we've been caught by surprise. Roland and I have had ... disagreements ... about how to go on. He wanted to wait. I didn't. I now believe he was right."

"But for the wrong reasons," Roland said in a dry tone. "In any case, we've settled our differences."

Susan was looking back and forth between them with something like alarm. What her gaze settled upon was the bruise on Roland's lower left jaw, clearly visible even in the faint light which crept through the half-open *sepultura* door. "Settled them how?"

"It doesn't matter," Roland said. "Farson intends a battle, or perhaps a series of them, in the Shaved Mountains, to the northwest of Gilead. To the forces of the

Affiliation moving toward him, he will seem trapped. In a more ordinary course of things, that might even have been true. Farson intends to engage them, trap them, and destroy them with the weapons of the Old People. These he will drive with oil from Citgo. The oil in the tankers we saw, Susan."

"Where will it be refined so Farson can use it?"

"Someplace west of here along his route," Cuthbert said. "We think very likely the Vi Castis. Do you know it? It's mining country."

"I've heard of it, but I've never actually been out of Hambry in my life." She looked levelly at Roland. "I think that's to change soon."

"There's a good deal of machinery left over from the days of the Old People in those mountains," Alain said. "Most is up in the draws and canyons, they say. Robots and killer lights—razor-beams, such are called, because they'll cut you clean in half if you run into them. The gods know what else. Some of it's undoubtedly just legend, but where there's smoke, there's often fire. In any case, it seems the most likely spot for refining."

"And then they'd take it on to where Farson's waiting," Cuthbert said. "Not that that part matters to us; we've got all we can handle right here in Mejis."

"I've been waiting in order to get it all," Roland said. "Every bit of their damned plunder."

"In case you haven't noticed, our friend is just a wee nubbin ambitious," Cuthbert said, and winked.

Roland paid no attention. He was looking in the direction of Eyebolt Canyon. There was no noise from there this night; the wind had shifted onto its autumn course and away from town. "If we can fire the oil, the rest will go up with it... and the oil is the most important thing, anyway. I want to destroy it, then I want to get the hell out of here. The four of us."

"They mean to move on Reaping Day, don't they?" Susan asked.

"Oh yes, it seems so," Cuthbert said, then laughed. It was a rich, infectious sound—the laughter of a child—and as he did it, he rocked back and forth and held his stomach as a child would.

Susan looked puzzled. "What? What is it?"

"I can't tell," he said, chortling. "It's too rich for me. I'll laugh all the way through it, and Roland will be annoyed. You do it, Al. Tell Susan about our visit from Deputy Dave."



"He came out to see us at the Bar K," Alain said, smiling himself. "Talked to us like an uncle. Told us Hambry-folk don't care for outsiders at their Fairs, and we'd best keep right to our place on the day of the full moon."

"That's insane!" Susan spoke indignantly, as one is apt to when one hears one's hometown unjustly maligned. "We *welcome* strangers to our fairs, so we do, and always have! We're not a bunch of... of savages!"

"Soft, soft," Cuthbert said, giggling. "We know that, but Deputy Dave don't know we know, do he? He knows his wife makes the best white tea for miles around, and after that Dave's pretty much at sea. Sher-iff Herk knows a *leetle* more, I sh'd judge, but not much."

"The pains they've taken to warn us off means two things," Roland said. "The first is that they intend to move on Reaping Fair-Day, just as you said, Susan. The second is that they think they can steal Parson's goods right out from under our noses."

"And then perhaps blame us for it afterward," Alain said.

She looked curiously from one to the other, then said: "What have you planned, then?"

"To destroy what they've left at Citgo as bait of our own and then to strike them where they gather," Roland said quietly. "That's Hanging Rock. At least half the tankers they mean to take west are there already. They'll have a force of men. As many as two hundred, perhaps, although I think it will turn out to be less. I intend that all these men should die."

"If they don't, we will," Alain said.

"How can the four of us kill two hundred soldiers?"

"We can't. But if we can start one or two of the clustered tankers burning, we think there'll be an explosion—mayhap a fearful one. The surviving soldiers will be terrified, and the surviving leaders infuriated. They'll see us, because we'll let ourselves be seen ..."

Alain and Cuthbert were watching him breathlessly. The rest they had either been told or had guessed, but this part was the counsel Roland had, until now, kept to himself.

"What then?" she asked, frightened. "*What then?* "

"I think we can lead them into Eyebolt Canyon," Roland said. "I think we can lead them into the thinny."

Thunderstruck silence greeted this. Then, not without respect, Susan said:

"You're mad."

"No," Cuthbert said thoughtfully. "He's not. You're thinking about that little cut in the canyon wall, aren't you, Roland? The one just before the jog in the canyon floor."

Roland nodded. "Four could scramble up that way without too much trouble. At the top, we'll pile a fair amount of rock. Enough to start a landslide down on any that should try following us."

"That's horrible," Susan said.

"It's survival," Alain replied. "If they're allowed to have the oil and put it to use, they'll slaughter every Affiliation man that gets in range of their weapons. The Good Man takes no prisoners."

"I didn't say wrong, only horrible."

They were silent for a moment, four children contemplating the murders of two hundred men. Except they wouldn't all be men; many (perhaps even most) would be boys roughly their own ages.

At last she said, "Those not caught in your rockslide will only ride back out of the canyon again."

"No, they won't." Alain had seen the lay of the land and now understood the matter almost completely. Roland was nodding, and there was a trace of a smile on his mouth.

"Why not?"

"The brush at the front of the canyon. We're going to set it on fire, aren't we, Roland? And if the prevailing winds are prevailing that day ... the smoke ..."

"It'll drive them the rest of the way in," Roland agreed. "Into the thinny."

"How will you set the brush-pile alight?" Susan asked. "I know it's dry, but surely you won't have time to use a sulfur match or your flint and steel."

"You can help us there," Roland said, "just as you can help us set the tankers alight. We can't count on touching off the oil with just our guns, you know; crude oil is a lot less volatile than people might think. And Sheemie's going to help you, I hope."

"Tell me what you want."

6

They talked another twenty minutes, refining the plan surprisingly little— all of them seemed to understand that if they planned too much and things changed suddenly, they might freeze. *Ka* had swept them into this; it was perhaps best that they count on *ka*—and their own courage—to sweep them back out again.

Cuthbert was reluctant to involve Sheemie, but finally went along— the boy's part would be minimal, if not exactly low-risk, and Roland agreed that they could take him with them when they left Mejis for good. A party of rive was as fine as a party of four, he said.

"All right," Cuthbert said at last, then turned to Susan. "It ought to be you or me who talks to him."

"I will."

"Make sure he understands not to tell Coral Thorin so much as a word," Cuthbert said. "It isn't that the Mayor's her brother; I just don't trust that bitch."

"I can give ye a better reason than Hart not to trust her," Susan said. "My aunt says she's taken up with Eldred Jonas. Poor Aunt Cord! She's had the worst summer of her life. Nor will the fall be much better, I wot. Folk will call her the aunt of a traitor."

"Some will know better," Alain said. "Some always do."

"Mayhap, but my Aunt Cordelia's the sort of woman who never hears good gossip. No more does she speak it. She fancied Jonas herself, ye ken."

Cuthbert was thunderstruck. "Fancied Jonas! By all the fiddling gods! Can you imagine it! Why, if they hung folk for bad taste in love, your auntie would go early, wouldn't she?"

Susan giggled, hugged her knees, and nodded.

"It's time we left," Roland said. "If something chances that Susan needs to know right away, we'll use the red stone in the rock wall at Green Heart."

"Good," Cuthbert said. "Let's get out of here. The cold in this place eats into the bones."

Roland stirred, stretching life back into his legs. "The important thing is that they've decided to leave us free while they round up and run. That's our edge, and

it's a good one. And now—"

Alain's quiet voice stopped him. "There's another matter. Very important."

Roland sank back down on his hunkers, looking at Alain curiously.

"The witch."

Susan started, but Roland only barked an impatient laugh. "She doesn't figure in our business, Al—I can't see how she could. I don't believe she's a part of Jonas's conspiracy—"

"Neither do I," Alain said.

"—and Cuthbert and I persuaded her to keep her mouth shut about Susan and me. If we hadn't, her aunt would have raised the roof by now."

"But don't you see?" Alain asked. "Who Rhea might have told isn't really the question. The question is *how she knew in the first place.*"

"It's pink," Susan said abruptly. Her hand was on her hair, fingers touching the place where the cut ends had begun to grow out.

"What's pink?" Alain asked.

"The moon," she said, and then shook her head. "I don't know. I don't know what I'm talking about. Brainless as Pinch and Jilly, I am ... Roland? What's wrong? What ails thee?"

For Roland was no longer hunkering; he had collapsed into a loose sitting position on the petal-strewn stone floor. He looked like a young man trying not to faint. Outside the mausoleum there was a bony rattle of fall leaves and the cry of a nightjar.

"Dear gods," he said in a low voice. "It can't be. *It can't be true.*" His eyes met Cuthbert's.

All the humor had washed out of the latter young man's face, leaving a ruthless and calculating bedrock his own mother might not have recognized ... or might not have wanted to.

"Pink," Cuthbert said. "Isn't that interesting—the same word your father happened to mention just before we left, Roland, wasn't it? He warned us about the pink one. We thought it was a joke. *Almost.*"

"Oh!" Alain's eyes flew wide open. "Oh, *fuck!*" he blurted. He realized what he had said while sitting leg-to-leg with his best friend's lover and clapped his hands over his mouth. His cheeks flamed red.

Susan barely noticed. She was staring at Roland in growing fear and confusion.

"What?" she asked. "What is it ye know? Tell me! *Tell me!*"

"I'd like to hypnotize you again, as I did that day in the willow grove," Roland said. "I want to do it right now, before we talk of this more and drag mud across what you remember."

Roland had reached into his pocket while she was speaking. Now he took out a shell, and it began to dance across the back of his hand once more. Her eyes went to it at once, like steel drawn to a magnet.

"May I?" he asked. "By your leave, dear."

"Aye, as ye will." Her eyes were widening and growing glassy. "I don't know why ye think this time should be any different, but. . ." She stopped talking, her eyes continuing to follow the dance of the shell across Roland's hand. When he stopped moving it and clasped it in his fist, her eyes closed. Her breath was soft and regular.

"Gods, she went like a stone," Cuthbert whispered, amazed. "She's been hypnotized before. By Rhea, I think." Roland paused. Then: "Susan, do you hear me?"

"Aye, Roland, I hear ye very well." "I want you to hear another voice, too."

"Whose?"

Roland beckoned to Alain. If anyone could break through the block in Susan's mind (or find a way around it), it would be him.

"Mine, Susan," Alain said, coming to Roland's side. "Do you know it?" She smiled with her eyes closed. "Aye, you're Alain. Richard Stock-worth that was."

"That's right." He looked at Roland with nervous, questioning eyes— *What shall I ask her?*—but for a moment Roland didn't reply. He was in two other places, both at the same time, and hearing two different voices.

Susan, by the stream in the willow grove: *She says, "Aye, lovely, just so, it's a good girl y'are, " then everything's pink.*

His father, in the yard behind the Great Hall: *It's the grapefruit. By which I mean it's the pink one.*

The pink one.

Their horses were saddled and loaded; the three boys stood before them,

outwardly stolid, inwardly feverish to be gone. The road, and the mysteries that lie along it, calls out to none as it calls to the young.

They were in the courtyard which lay east of the Great Hall, not far from where Roland had bested Cort, setting all these things in motion. It was early morning, the sun not yet risen, the mist lying over the green fields in gray ribbons. At a distance of about twenty paces, Cuthbert's and Alain's fathers stood sentry with their legs apart and their hands on the butts of their guns. It was unlikely that Marten (who had for the time being absented himself from the palace, and, so far as any knew, from Gilead itself) would mount any sort of attack on them—not here—but it wasn't entirely out of the question, either.

So it was that only Roland's father spoke to them as they mounted up to begin their ride east to Mejis and the Outer Arc.

"One last thing," he said as they adjusted their saddle girths. "I doubt you'll see anything that touches on our interests—not in Mejis—but I'd have you keep an eye out for a color of the rainbow. The Wizard's Rainbow, that is." He chuckled, then added: "It's the grapefruit. By which I mean it's the pink one."

"Wizard's Rainbow is just a fairy-tale," Cuthbert said, smiling in response to Steven's smile. Then—perhaps it was something in Steven Deschain's eyes—Cuthbert's smile faltered. "Isn't it?"

"Not all the old stories are true, but I think that of Maerlyn's Rainbow is," Steven replied. "It's said that once there were thirteen glass balls in it—one for each of the Twelve Guardians, and one representing the nexus-point of the Beams."

"One for the Tower," Roland said in a low voice, feeling gooseflesh. "One for the Dark Tower."

"Aye, Thirteen it was called when I was a boy. We'd tell stories about the black ball around the fire sometimes, and scare ourselves silly . . . unless our fathers caught us at it. My own da said it wasn't wise to talk about Thirteen, for it might hear its name called and roll your way. But Black Thirteen doesn't matter to you three . . . not now, at least. No, it's the pink one. Maerlyn's Grapefruit."

It was impossible to tell how serious he was . . . or if he was serious at all.

"If the other balls in the Wizard's Rainbow *did* exist, most are broken now. Such things never stay in one place or one pair of hands for long, you know, and even enchanted glass has a way of breaking. Yet at least three or four bends o' the Rainbow may still be rolling around this sad world of ours. The blue, almost

certainly. A desert tribe of slow mu-tants—the Total Hogs, they called themselves—had that one less than fifty years ago, although it's slipped from sight again since. The green and the orange are reputed to be in Lud and Dis, respectively. And, just maybe, the pink one."

"What exactly do they do?" Roland asked. "What are they good for?"

"For seeing. Some colors of the Wizard's Rainbow are reputed to look into the future. Others look into the other worlds—those where the demons live, those where the Old People are supposed to have gone when they left our world. These may also show the location of the secret doors which pass between the worlds. Other colors, they say, can look far in our own world, and see things people would as soon keep secret. They never see the good; only the ill. How much of this is true and how much is myth no one knows for sure."

He looked at them, his smile fading.

"But this we do know: John Farson is said to have a talisman, some-thing that glows in his tent late at night ... sometimes before battles, sometimes before large movements of troop and horse, sometimes before momentous decisions are announced. And it glows pink."

"Maybe he has an electric light and puts a pink scarf over it when he prays," Cuthbert said. He looked around at his friends, a little defensively. "I'm not joking; there are people who do that."

"Perhaps," Roland's father said. "Perhaps that's all it is, or something like. But perhaps it's a good deal more. All I can say of my own knowl-edge is that he keeps beating us, he keeps slipping away from us, and he keeps turning up where he's least expected. If the magic is in him and not in some talisman he owns, gods help the Affiliation."

"We'll keep an eye out, if you like," Roland said, "but Parson's in the north or west. We're going east." As if his father did not know this.

"If it's a bend o' the Rainbow," Steven replied, "it could be any-where—east or south's as likely as west. He can't keep it with him all the time, you see. No matter how much it would ease his mind and heart to do so. No one can."

"Why not?"

"Because they're alive, and hungry," Steven said. "One begins using em; one ends being used *by* em. If Farson has a piece of the Rainbow, he'll send it away and call it back only when he needs it. He understands the risk of losing it, but he also

understands the risk of keeping it too long."

There was a question which the other two, constrained by politeness, couldn't ask. Roland could, and did. "You *are* serious about this. Dad? It's not just a leg-pull, is it?"

"I'm sending you away at an age when many boys still don't sleep well if their mothers don't kiss them goodnight," Steven said. "I expect to see all three of you again, alive and well—Mejis is a lovely, quiet place, or was when I was a boy—but I can't be sure of it. As things are these days, no one can be sure of anything. I wouldn't send you away with a joke and a laugh. I'm surprised you think it."

"Cry your pardon," Roland said. An uneasy peace had descended between him and his father, and he would not rupture it. Still, he was wild to be off. Pusher jiggled beneath him, as if seconding that.

"I don't expect you boys to see Maerlyn's glass . . . but I didn't expect to be seeing you off at fourteen with revolvers tucked in your bed-rolls, either. *Ka's* at work here, and where *ka* works, anything is possible."

Slowly, slowly, Steven took off his hat, stepped back, and swept them a bow. "Go in peace, boys. And return in health."

"Long days and pleasant nights, sai," Alain said.

"Good fortune," Cuthbert said.

"I love you," Roland said.

Steven nodded. "Thankee-sai—I love you, too. My blessings, boys." He said this last in a loud voice, and the other two men—Robert Allgood and Christopher Johns, who had been known in the days of his savage youth as Burning Chris—added their own blessings.

So the three of them rode toward their end of the Great Road, while summer lay all about them, breathless as a gasp. Roland looked up and saw something that made him forget all about the Wizard's Rainbow. It was his mother, leaning out of her apartment's bedroom window: the oval of her face surrounded by the timeless gray stone of the castle's west wing. There were tears coursing down her cheeks, but she smiled and lifted one hand in a wide wave. Of the three of them, only Roland saw her.

He didn't wave back.



"*Roland!*" An elbow struck him in the ribs, hard enough to dispel these memories, brilliant as they were, and return him to the present. It was Cuthbert. "Do something, if you mean to! Get us out of this deadhouse before I shiver the skin right off my bones!"

Roland put his mouth close by Alain's ear. "Be ready to help me."

Alain nodded.

Roland turned to Susan. "After the first time we were together *an-tet*, you went to the stream in the grove."

"Aye."

"You cut some of your hair."

"Aye." That same dreaming voice. "So I did."

"Would you have cut it all?"

"Aye, every lick and lock."

"Do you know who told you to cut it?"

A long pause. Roland was about to turn to Alain when she said, "Rhea." Another pause. "She wanted to fiddle me up."

"Yes, but what happened later? What happened while you stood in the doorway?"

"Oh, and something else happened before."

"What?"

"I fetched her wood," said she, and said no more.

Roland looked at Cuthbert, who shrugged. Alain spread his hands. Roland thought of asking the latter boy to step forward, and judged it still wasn't quite time.

"Never mind the wood for now," he said, "or all that came before. We'll talk of that later, mayhap, but not just yet. What happened as you were leaving? What did she say to you about your hair?"

"Whispered in my ear. And she had a Jesus-man."

"Whispered what?"

"I don't know. That part is pink."

Here it was. He nodded to Alain. Alain bit his lip and stepped forward. He looked frightened, but as he took Susan's hands in his own and spoke to her, his voice was calm and soothing.

"Susan? It's Alain Johns. Do you know me?"

"Aye—Richard Stockworth that was."

"What did Rhea whisper in your ear?"

A frown, faint as a shadow on an overcast day, creased her brow. "I can't see. It's pink."

"You don't need to see," Alain said. "Seeing's not what we want right now. Close your eyes so you can't do it at all."

"They *are* closed," she said, a trifle pettishly. *She's frightened*, Roland thought. He felt an urge to tell Alain to stop, to wake her up, and restrained it.

"The ones inside," Alain said. "The ones that look out from memory. Close those, Susan. Close them for your father's sake, and tell me not what you see but what you *hear*. Tell me what she *said*."

Chillingly, unexpectedly, the eyes in her face opened as she closed those in her mind. She stared at Roland, and through him, with the eyes of an ancient statue. Roland bit back a scream.

"You were in the doorway, Susan?" Alain asked.

"Aye. So we both were."

"Be there again."

"Aye." A dreaming voice. Faint but clear. "Even with my eyes closed I can see—the moon's light. 'Tis as big as a grapefruit."

*It's the grapefruit*, Roland thought. *By which I mean, it's the pink one.*

"And what do you hear? What does she say?"

"No, I say." The faintly petulant voice of a little girl. "First I say, Alain. I say 'And is our business done?' and she says 'Mayhap there's one more little thing,' and then ... then..."

Alain squeezed gently down on her hands, using whatever it was he had in his own, his touch, sending it into her. She tried feebly to pull back, but he wouldn't let her. "Then what? What next?"

"She has a little silver medal."

"Yes?"

"She leans close and asks if I hear her. I can smell her breath. It reeks o' garlic. And other things, even worse." Susan's face wrinkled in dis-taste. "I say I hear her. Now I can see. I see the medal she has."

"Very well, Susan," Alain said. "What else do you see?"

"Rhea. She looks like a skull in the moonlight. A skull with hair."

"Gods," Cuthbert muttered, and crossed his arms over his chest.

"She says I should listen. I say I will listen. She says I should obey. I say I will obey. She says 'Aye, lovely, just so, it's a good girl y'are.' She's stroking my hair. All the time. My braid." Susan raised a dreaming, drowning hand, pale in the shadows of the crypt, to her blonde hair. "And then she says there's something I'm to do when my virginity's over. 'Wait,' she says, 'until he's asleep beside ye, then cut yer hair off yer head. Every strand. Right down to yer very skull.' "

The boys looked at her in mounting horror as her voice *became* Rhea's—the growling, whining cadences of the old woman of the Coos. Even the face—except for the coldly dreaming eyes—had become a hag's face.

" 'Cut it all, girl, every whore's strand of it, aye, and go back to him as bald as ye came from yer mother! See how he likes ye then!' "

She fell silent. Alain turned his pallid face to Roland. His lips were trembling, but still he held her hands.

"Why is the moon pink?" Roland asked. "Why is the moon pink when you try to remember?"

"It's her glam." Susan seemed almost surprised, almost gay. Confid-ing. "She keeps it under her bed, so she does. She doesn't know I saw it."

"Are you sure?"

"Aye," Susan said, then added simply: "She would have killed me if she knew." She giggled, shocking them all. "Rhea has the moon in a box under her bed." She lilted this in the singsong voice of a small child.

"A pink moon," Roland said.

"Aye."

"Under her bed."

"Aye." This time she did pull her hands free of Alain's. She made a circle with them in the air, and as she looked up at it, a dreadful expres-sion of greed passed over her face like a cramp. "I should like to have it, Roland. So I should. Lovely moon! I saw it when she sent me for the wood. Through her window. She looked ... young." Then, once again: "I sh'd like to have such a thing."

"No—you wouldn't. But it's under her bed?"

"Aye, in a magic place she makes with passes."

"She has a piece of Maerlyn's Rainbow," Cuthbert said in a wonder-ing voice.

"The old bitch has what your da told us about—no wonder she knows all she

does!"

"Is there more we need?" Alain asked. "Her hands have gotten very cold. I don't like having her this deep. She's done well, but. . ."

"I think we're done."

"Shall I tell her to forget?"

Roland shook his head at once—they were *ka-tet*, for good or ill. He took hold of her fingers, and yes, they *were* cold.

"Susan?"

"Aye, dear."

"I'm going to say a rhyme. When I finish, you'll remember every-thing, as you did before. All right?"

She smiled and closed her eyes again. "Bird and bear and hare and fish. . ."

Smiling, Roland finished, "Give my love her fondest wish."

Her eyes opened. She smiled. "You," she said again, and kissed him. "Still you, Roland. Still you, my love."

Unable to help himself, Roland put his arms around her.

Cuthbert looked away. Alain looked down at his boots and cleared his throat.

## 9

As they rode back toward Seafront, Susan with her arms around Roland's waist, she asked: "Will you take the glass from her?"

"Best leave it where it is for now. It was left in her safekeeping by Jonas, on behalf of Parson, I have no doubt. It's to be sent west with the rest of the plunder; I've no doubt of that, either. We'll deal with it when we deal with the tankers and Parson's men."

"Ye'd take it with us?"

"Take it or break it. I suppose I'd rather take it back to my father, but that has its own risks. We'll have to be careful. It's a powerful glam."

"Suppose she sees our plans? Suppose she warns Jonas or Kimba Rimer?"

"If she doesn't see us coming to take away her precious toy, I don't think she'll mind our plans one way or the other. I think we've put a scare into her, and if the ball has really gotten a hold on her, watching in it's what she'll mostly want to do with her time now."

"And hold onto it. She'll want to do that, too."

"Aye."

Rusher was walking along a path through the seacliff woods. Through the thinning branches they could glimpse the ivied gray wall surrounding Mayor's House and hear the rhythmic roar of waves breaking on the shingle below.

"You can get in safe, Susan?"

"No fear."

"And you know what you and Sheemie are to do?"

"Aye. I feel better than I have in ages. It's as if my mind is finally clear of some old shadow."

"If so, it's Alain you have to thank. I couldn't have done it on my own."

"There's magic in his hands."

"Yes." They had reached the servants' door. Susan dismounted with fluid ease. He stepped down himself and stood beside her with an arm around her waist. She was looking up at the moon.

"Look, it's fattened enough so you can see the beginning of the De-mon's face. Does thee see it?"

A blade of nose, a bone of grin. No eye yet, but yes, he saw it.

"It used to terrify me when I was little." Susan was whispering now, mindful of the house behind the wall. "I'd pull the blind when the Demon was full. I was afraid that if he could see me, he'd reach down and take me up to where he was and eat me." Her lips were trembling. "Children are silly, aren't they?"

"Sometimes." He hadn't been afraid of Demon Moon himself as a small child, but he was afraid of this one. The future seemed so dark, and the way through to the light so slim. "I love thee, Susan. With all my heart, I do."

"I know. And I love thee." She kissed his mouth with gentle open lips. Put his hand on her breast for a moment, then kissed the warm palm. He held her, and she looked past him at the ripening moon.

"A week until the Reap," she said. "*Fin de ano* is what the *vaqueros* and *labradores* call it. Do they call it so in your land?"

"Near enough," Roland said. "It's called closing the year. Women go about giving preserves and kisses."

She laughed softly against his shoulder. "Perhaps I'll not find things so different, after all."

"You must save all your best kisses for me."

"I will."

"Whatever comes, we'll be together," he said, but above them, De-mon Moon grinned into the starry dark above the Clean Sea, as if he knew a different future.

## CHAPTER VI CLOSING THE YEAR

### 1

So now comes to Mejis *fin de ano*, known in toward the center of Mid-World as closing the year. It comes as it has a thousand times before ... or ten thousand, or a hundred thousand. No one can tell for sure; the world has moved on and time has grown strange. In Mejis their saying is "Time is a face on the water."

In the fields, the last of the potatoes are being picked by men and women who wear gloves and their heaviest *scrapes*, for now the wind has turned firmly, blowing east to west, blowing hard, and always there's the smell of salt in the chilly air—a smell like tears. *Los campesinos* harvest the final rows cheerfully enough, talking of the things they'll do and the capers they'll cut at Reaping Fair, but they feel all of autumn's old sad-ness in the wind; the going of the year. It runs away from them like water in a stream, and although none speak of it, all know it

very well.

In the orchards, the last and highest of the apples are picked by laugh-ing young men (in these not-quite-gales, the final days of picking belong only to them) who bob up and down like crow's nest lookouts. Above them, in skies which hold a brilliant, cloudless blue, squadrons of geese fly south, calling their rusty *adieux*. The small fishing boats are pulled from the water; their hulls are scraped and painted by singing owners who mostly work stripped to the waist in spite of the chill in the air. They sing the old songs as they work—

*I am a man of the bright blue sea,  
All I see, all I see,  
I am a man of the Barony,  
All I see is mine-o!*

*I am a man of the bright blue hay,  
All I say, all I say,  
Until my nets are full I stay  
All I say is fine-o!*

—and sometimes a little cask of *graf* is tossed from dock to dock. On the bay itself only the large boats now remain, pacing about the big circles which mark their dropped nets as a working dog may pace around a flock of sheep. At noon the bay is a rippling sheet of autumn fire and the men on the boats sit cross-legged, eating their lunches, and know that all they see is theirs-o ... at least until the gray gales of autumn come swarming over the horizon, coughing out their gusts of sleet and snow.

Closing, closing the year.

Along the streets of Hambry, the Reap-lights now bum at night, and the hands of the stuffy-guys are painted red. Reap-charms hang every-where, and although women often kiss and are kissed in the streets and in both marketplaces—often by men they do not know—sexual intercourse has come to an almost complete halt. It will resume (with a bang, you might say) on Reap-Night. There will be the usual crop of Full Earth ba-bies the following year as a result.

On the Drop, the horses gallop wildly, as if understanding (very likely they do)

that their time of freedom is coming to an end. They swoop and then stand with their faces pointing west when the wind gusts, showing their asses to winter. On the ranches, porch-nets are taken down and shutters rehung. In the huge ranch kitchens and smaller farmhouse kitchens, no one is stealing Reap-kisses, and no one is even thinking about sex. This is the time of putting up and laying by, and the kitchens fume with steam and pulse with heat from before dawn until long after dark. There is the smell of apples and beets and beans and sharproot and curing strips of meat. Women work ceaselessly all day and then sleep-walk to bed, where they lie like corpses until the next dark morning calls them back to their kitchens.

Leaves are burned in town yards, and as the week goes on and Old Demon's face shows ever more clearly, red-handed stuffy-guys are thrown on the pyres more and more frequently. In the fields, cornshucks flare like torches, and often stuffies bum with them, their red hands and white-cross eyes rippling in the heat. Men stand around these fires, not speaking, their faces solemn. No one will say what terrible old ways and unspeakable old gods are being propitiated by the burning of the stuffy-guys, but they all know well enough. From time to time one of these men will whisper two words under his breath: *charyou tree*.

They are closing, closing, closing the year.

The streets rattle with firecrackers—and sometimes with a heftier "big-hang" that makes even placid carthorses rear in their traces—and echo with the laughter of children. On the porch of the mercantile and across the street at the Travellers' Rest, kisses—sometimes humidly open and with much sweet lashing of tongues—are exchanged, but Coral Thorin's whores ("cotton-gillies" is what the airy-fairy ones like Gert Moggins like to call themselves) are bored. They will have little custom this week.

This is not Year's End, when the winterlogs will bum and Mejis will be bamdances from one end to the other . . . and yet it is. This is the *real* year's end, *charyou tree*, and everyone, from Stanley Ruiz standing at the bar beneath The Romp to the farthest of Fran Lengyll's *vaqueros* out on the edge of the Bad Grass, knows it. There is a kind of echo in the bright air, a yearning for other places in the blood, a loneliness in the heart that sings like the wind.

But this year there's something else, as well: a sense of wrongness that no one can quite voice. Folks who never had a nightmare in their lives will awake screaming



with them during the week of *fin de ano*; men who consider themselves peaceful will find themselves not only in fist-fights but instigating them; discontented boys who would only have dreamed of running away in other years will this year actually do it, and most will not come back after the first night spent sleeping raw. There is a sense—inarticulate but very much there—that things have gone amiss this season. It is the closing of the year; it is also the closing of the peace. For it is here, in the sleepy Out-World Barony of Mejis, that Mid-World's last great conflict will shortly begin; it is from here that the blood will begin to flow. In two years, no more, the world as it has been will be swept away. It starts here. From its field of roses, the Dark Tower cries out in its beast's voice. Time is a face on the water.

## 2

Coral Thorin was coming down the High Street from the Bayview Hotel when she spied Sheemie, leading Caprichoso and heading in the opposite direction. The boy was singing "Careless Love" in a voice both high and sweet. His progress was slow; the barrels slung over Capi's back were half again as large as the ones he had carried up to the Coos not long before.

Coral hailed her boy-of-all-work cheerily enough. She had reason to be cheery; Eldred Jonas had no use for *fin de ano* abstinence. And for a man with a bad leg, he could be very inventive.

"Sheemie!" she called. "Where go ye? Seafront?"

"Aye," Sheemie said. "I've got the *graf them* asked for. All parties come Reaping Fair, aye, tons of em. Dance a lot, get hot a lot, drink *graf* to cool off a lot! How pretty you look, sai Thorin, cheeks all pinky-pink, so they are."

"Oh, law! How kind of you to say, Sheemie!" She favored him with a dazzling smile. "Go on, now, you flatterer—don't linger."

"Noey-no, off I go."

Coral stood watching after him and smiling. *Dance a lot, get hot a lot*, Sheemie had said. About the dancing Coral didn't know, but she was sure this year's Reaping would be hot, all right. Very hot indeed.

## 3

Miguel met Sheemie at Seafront's archway, gave him the look of lofty contempt he reserved for the lower orders, then pulled the cork from first one barrel and then the other. With the first, he only sniffed from the bung; at the second, he stuck his thumb in and then sucked it thoughtfully. With his wrinkled cheeks hollowed inward and his toothless old mouth working, he looked like an ancient bearded baby.

"Tasty, ain't it?" Sheemie asked. "Tasty as a pasty, ain't it, good old Miguel, been here a thousand years?"

Miguel, still sucking his thumb, favored Sheemie with a sour look. "*Andale. Andale, simplon.*"

Sheemie led his mule around the house to the kitchen. Here the breeze off the ocean was sharp and shiversome. He waved to the women in the kitchen, but not a one waved back; likely they didn't even see him. A pot boiled on every trink of the enormous stove, and the women— working in loose long-sleeved cotton garments like shifts and wearing their hair tied up in brightly colored clouts—moved about like phantoms glimpsed in fog.

Sheemie took first one barrel from Capi's back, then the other. Grunt-ing, he carried them to the huge oak tank by the back door. He opened the tank's lid, bent over it, and then backed away from the eye-wateringly strong smell of elderly *graf*.

"Whew!" he said, hoisting the first barrel. "Ye could get drunk just on the smell o' that lot!"

He emptied in the fresh *graf*, careful not to spill. When he was finished, the tank was pretty well topped up. That was good, for on Reaping Night, apple-beer would flow out of the kitchen taps like water.

He slipped the empty barrels into their carriers, looked into the kitchen once more to be sure he wasn't being observed (he wasn't; Coral's simple-minded tavern-boy was the last thing on anyone's minds that morning), and then led Capi not back the way they'd come but along a path which led to Seafront's storage sheds.

There were three of them in a row, each with its own red-handed stuffy-guy sitting in front. The guys appeared to be watching Sheemie, and that gave him the shivers. Then he remembered his trip to crazy old bitch-lady Rhea's house. *She* had been scary. These were just old duds stuffed full of straw.

"Susan?" he called, low. "Are ye here?"

The door of the center shed was ajar. Now it trundled open a little. "Come in!" she called, also low. "Bring the mule! Hurry!"

He led Capi into a shed which smelled of straw and beans and tack ... and something else. Something sharper. *Fireworks*, he thought. *Shooting-powder, too*. Susan, who had spent the morning enduring final fittings, was dressed in a thin silk wrapper and large leather boots. Her hair was done up in curling papers of bright blue and red.

Sheemie tittered. "You look quite amusing, Susan, daughter of Pat. Quite a chuckle for me, I think."

"Yes, I'm a picture for an artist to paint, all right," Susan said, look-ing distracted. "We have to hurry. I have twenty minutes before I'm missed. I'll be missed before, if that randy old goat is looking for me ...let's be quick!"

They lifted the barrels from Capi's back. Susan took a broken horse-bit from the pocket of her wrapper and used the sharp end to pry off one of the tops. She tossed the bit to Sheemie, who pried off the other. The apple-tart smell of *graf* filled the shed.

"Here!" She tossed Sheemie a soft cloth. "Dry it out as well as you can. Doesn't have to be perfect, they're wrapped, but it's best to be safe."

They wiped the insides of the barrels, Susan stealing nervous glances at the door every few seconds. "All right," she said. "Good. Now ... there's two kinds. I'm sure they won't be missed; there's enough stuff back there to blow up half the world." She hurried back into the dimness of the shed, holding the hem of her wrapper up with one hand, her boots clomping. When she came back, her arms were full of wrapped packages.

"These are the bigger ones," she said.

He stored them in one of the casks. There were a dozen packages in all, and Sheemie could feel round things inside, each about the size of a child's fist. Big-bangers. By the time he had finished packing and putting the top back on the barrel, she had returned with an armload of smaller packages. These he stored in the other barrel. They were the little 'uns, from the feel, the ones that not only banged but flashed colored fire.

She helped him resling the barrels on Capi's back, still shooting those little glances at the shed door. When the barrels were secured to Caprichoso's sides, Susan

sighed with relief and brushed her sweaty forehead with the backs of her hands. "Thank the gods that part's over," she said. "Now ye know where ye're to take them?"

"Aye, Susan daughter of Pat. To the Bar K. My friend Arthur Heath will put em safe."

"And if anyone asks what ye're doing out that way?" "Taking sweet *graf* to the In-World boys, 'cause they've decided not to come to town for the Fair . . . why won't they, Susan? Don't they like Fairs?"

"Ye'll know soon enough. Don't mind it now, Sheemie. Go on—best be on your way."

Yet he lingered.

"What?" she asked, trying not to be impatient. "Sheemie, what is it?"

"I'd like to take a *fin de ano* kiss from ye, so I would." Sheemie's face had gone an alarming shade of red.

Susan laughed in spite of herself, then stood on her toes and kissed the comer of his mouth. With that, Sheemie floated out to the Bar K with his load of fire.

#### 4

Reynolds rode out to Citgo the following day, galloping with a scarf wrapped around his face so only his eyes peered out. He would be very glad to get out of this damned place that couldn't decide if it was ranch-land or seacoast. The temperature wasn't all that low, but after coming in over the water, the wind cut like a razor. Nor was that all—there was a brooding quality to Hambry and all of Mejis as the days wound down toward the Reap; a haunted feeling he didn't care for a bit. Roy felt it, too. Reynolds could see it in his eyes.

No, he'd be glad to have those three baby knights so much ash in the wind and this place just a memory.

He dismounted in the crumbling refinery parking lot, tied his horse to the bumper of a rusty old hulk with the mystery-word chevrolet barely readable on its tailboard, then walked toward the oilpatch. The wind blew hard, chilling him even through the ranch-style sheepskin coat he wore, and twice he had to yank his hat down around his ears to keep it from blowing off. On the whole, he was glad he couldn't see himself; he proba-bly looked like a fucking farmer.

The place seemed fine, though . . . which was to say, deserted. The wind made a lonely souging sound as it combed through the firs on ei-ther side of the pipe. You'd never guess that there were a dozen pairs of eyes looking out at you as you strolled.

"Hai!" he called. "Come on out here, pard, and let's have some palaver."

For a moment there was no response; then Hiram Quint of the Piano Ranch and Barkie Callahan of the Travellers' Rest came ducking their way out through the trees. *Holy shit*, Reynolds thought, somewhere be-tween awe and amusement.

*There ain't that much beef in a butcher shop.*

There was a wretched old musketoon stuck into the waistband of Quint's pants; Reynolds hadn't seen one in years. He thought that if Quint was lucky, it would only misfire when he pulled the trigger. If he was un-lucky, it would blow up in his face and blind him.

"All quiet?" he asked.

Quint replied in Mejis bibble-babble. Barkie listened, then said: "All well, sai. He say he and his men grow impatient." Smiling cheerfully, his face giving no indication of what he was saying, Barkie added: "If brains was blackpowder, this ijit couldn't blow his nose."

"But he's a trustworthy idiot?"

Barkie shrugged. It might have been assent.

They went through the trees. Where Roland and Susan had seen al-most thirty tankers, there were now only half a dozen, and of those six, only two actually had oil in them. Men sat on the ground or snoozed with their *sombreros* over their faces. Most had guns that looked about as trust-worthy as the one in Quint's waistband. A few of the poorer *vaqs* had *bolas*. On the whole, Reynolds guessed they would be more effective.

"Tell Lord Perth here that if the boys come, it's got to be an ambush, and they'll only have one chance to do the job right," Reynolds said to Barkie.

Barkie spoke to Quint. Quint's lips parted in a grin, revealing a scari-fying picket of black and yellow fangs. He spoke briefly, then put his hands out in front of them and closed them into huge, scarred fists, one above the other, as if wringing the neck of an invisible enemy. When Barkie began to translate, Clay Reynolds waved it away. He had caught only one word, but it was enough: *muerto*.

All that pre-Fair week, Rhea sat in front of the glass, peering into its depths. She had taken time to sew Ermot's head back onto his body with clumsy stitches of black thread, and she sat with the decaying snake around her neck as she watched and dreamed, not noticing the stench that began to arise from the reptile as time passed. Twice Musty came nigh, mewing for food, and each time Rhea batted the troublesome thing away without so much as a glance. She herself grew more and more gaunt, her eyes now looking like the sockets of the skulls stored in the net by the door to her bedroom. She dozed occasionally as she sat with the ball in her lap and the stinking snakeskin looped about her throat, her head down, the sharp point of her chin digging at her chest, runners of drool hanging from the loose puckers of her lips, but she never really slept. There was too much to see, far too much to see.

And it was hers for the seeing. These days she didn't even have to pass her hands above the glass to open its pink mists. All the Barony's meanness, all its petty (and not so petty) cruelties, all its cozening and ly-ing lay before her. Most of what she saw was small and demeaning stuff—masturbating boys peeking through knotholes at their undressed sisters, wives going through husbands' pockets, looking for extra money or tobacco, Sheb the piano-player licking the seat of the chair where his favorite whore had sat for awhile, a maid at Seafront spitting into Kimba Rimer's pillowcase after the Chancellor had kicked her for being slow in getting out of his way.

These were all things which confirmed her opinion of the society she had left behind. Sometimes she laughed wildly; sometimes she spoke to the people she saw in the glass ball, as if they could hear her. By the third day of the week before Reaping, she had ceased her trips to the privy, even though she could carry the ball with her when she went, and the sour stench of urine began to rise from her. By the fourth day, Musty had ceased coming near her. Rhea dreamed in the ball and lost herself in her dreams, as others had done before her; deep in the petty pleasures of far seeing, she was un-aware that the pink ball was stealing the wrinkled remains of her *anima*. She likely would have considered it a fair trade if she had known. She saw all the things people did in the shadows, and they were the only things she cared for, and for them she almost certainly would have

considered her life's force a fair trade.

6

"Here," the boy said, "let *me* light it, gods damn you." Jonas would have recognized the speaker; he was the lad who had waved a severed dog's tail across the street at Jonas and called, *We're Big Coffin Hunters just like you!*

The boy to whom this charming child had spoken tried to hold onto the piece of liver they had copped from the knacker's behind the Low Market. The first boy seized his ear and twisted. The second boy howled and held the chunk of liver out, dark blood running down his grimy knuckles as he did.

"That's better," the first boy said, taking it. "You want to remember who the *capataz* is, round here."

They were behind a bakery stall in the Low Market. Nearby, drawn by the smell of hot fresh bread, was a mangy mutt with one blind eye. He stared at them with hungry hope.

There was a slit in the chunk of raw meat. Poking out of it was a green big-bang fuse. Below the fuse, the liver bulged like the stomach of a pregnant woman. The first boy took a sulfur match, stuck it between his protruding front teeth, and lit it.

"He won't never!" said a third boy, in an agony of hope and anticipation.

"Thin as he is?" the first boy said. "Oh yes he will. Bet ye my deck of cards against yer hosstail."

The third boy thought it over and shook his head.

The first boy grinned. "It's a wise child ye are," he said, and lit the big-bang's fuse.

"Hey, cully!" he called to the dog. "Want a bite o' sumpin good? Here ye go!"

He threw the chunk of raw liver. The scrawny dog never hesitated at the hissing fuse, but lunged forward with its one good eye fixed on the first decent food it had seen in days. As it snatched the liver out of the air, the big-bang the boys had slipped into it went off. There was a roar and a flash. The dog's head disintegrated from the jaws down. For a moment it continued to stand there, dripping, staring at them with its one good eye, and then it collapsed.

"Toadjer!" the first boy jeered. "Toadjer he'd take it! Happy Reap to us, eh?"

"What are you boys doing?" a woman's voice called sharply. "Get out of there, ye ravens!"

The boys fled, cackling, into the bright afternoon. They did sound like ravens.

7

Cuthbert and Alain sat their horses at the mouth of Eyebolt. Even with the wind blowing the sound of the thinny away from them, it got inside your head and buzzed there, rattling your teeth.

"I hate it," Cuthbert said through clenched teeth. "Gods, let's be quick."

"Aye," Alain said. They dismounted, bulky in their ranch-coats, and tied their horses to the brush which lay across the front of the canyon. Ordinarily, tethering wouldn't have been necessary, but both boys could see the horses hated the whining, grinding sound as much as they did. Cuthbert seemed to hear the thinny in his mind, speaking words of invitation in a groaning, horribly persuasive voice. *Come on, Bert. Leave all this foolishness behind: the drums, the pride, the fear of death, the loneliness you laugh at because laughing's all you can think to do. And the girl, leave her, too. You love her, don't you? And even if you don't, you want her. It's sad that she loves your friend instead of you, but if you come to me, all that will stop bothering you very soon. So come on. What are you waiting for?*

"What am I waiting for?" he muttered.

"Huh?"

"I said, what are we waiting for? Let's get this done and get the holy hell out of here."

From their saddlebags they each took a small cotton bag. These contained gunpowder extracted from the smaller firecrackers Sheemie had brought them two days before. Alain dropped to his knees, pulled his knife, and began to crawl backward, digging a trench as far under the roll of brush as he could.

"Dig it deep," Cuthbert said. "We don't want the wind to blow it away."

Alain gave him a look which was remarkably hot. "Do you want to do it? Just so you can make sure it's done right?"

*It's the thinny, Cuthbert thought. It's working on him, too.*

"No, Al," he said humbly. "You're doing fine for someone who's both blind and soft in the head. Go on."

Alain looked at him fiercely a moment longer, then grinned and re-sumed the trench under the brush. "You'll die young, Bert."



"Aye, likely." Cuthbert dropped to his own knees and began to crawl after Alain, sprinkling gunpowder into the trench and trying to ignore the buzzy, cajoling voice of the thinny. No, the gunpowder probably wouldn't blow away, not unless there was a full gale. But if it rained, even the rolls of brush wouldn't be much protection. If it rained—

*Don't think of that*, he told himself. *That's ka.*

They finished loading gunpowder trenches under both sides of the brush barrier in only ten minutes, but it felt longer. To the horses as well, it seemed; they were stamping impatiently at the far end of their tethers, their ears laid back and their eyes rolling. Cuthbert and Alain untied them and mounted up. Cuthbert's horse actually bucked twice . . . except it felt more to Cuthbert as if the poor old thing were shuddering.

In the middle distance, bright sunshine twanged of bright steel. The tankers at Hanging Rock. They had been pulled in as light to the sandstone outcrop as possible, but when the sun was high, most of the shadow disappeared, and concealment disappeared with it.

"I really can't believe it," Alain said as they started back. It would be a long ride, including a wide swing around Hanging Rock to make sure they weren't seen.

"They must think we're blind."

"It's stupid they think we are," Cuthbert said, "but I suppose it comes to the same."

Now that Eyebolt Canyon was falling behind them, he felt almost giddy with relief. Were they going in there a few days from now? Actually *going in*, riding to within mere yards of where that cursed puddle started? He couldn't believe it . . . and he made himself stop thinking about it before he could *start* believing it.

"More riders heading out to Hanging Rock," Alain said, pointing back toward the woods beyond the canyon. "Do you see them?"

They were small as ants from this distance, but Bert saw them very well.

"Changing the guard. The important thing is that they don't see us— you don't think they can, do you?"

"Over here? Not likely."

Cuthbert didn't think so, either.

"They'll *all* be down come Reap, won't they?" Alain asked. "It won't do us much good to only catch a few."

"Yes—I'm pretty sure they all will."

"Jonas and his pals?"

"Them, too."

Ahead of them, the Bad Grass grew closer. The wind blew hard in their faces, making their eyes water, but Cuthbert didn't mind. The sound of the thimble was down to a faint drone behind him, and would soon be gone completely. Right now that was all he needed to make him happy.

"Do you think we'll get away with it, Bert?"

"Dunno," Cuthbert said. Then he thought of the gunpowder trenches lying beneath the dry rolls of brush, and grinned. "But I'll tell you one thing, Al: they'll know we were here."

## 8

In Mejis, as in every other Barony of Mid-World, the week before a Fair-Day was a political week. Important people came in from the farther corners of the Barony, and there were a good many Conversationals leading up to the main Conversational on Reaping Day. Susan was expected to be present at these—mostly as a decorative testimony to the Mayor's continuing puissance. Olive was also present, and, in a cruelly comic dumb-show that only the women truly appreciated, they sat on either side of the aging cockatoo, Susan pouring the coffee, Olive passing the cake, both of them gracefully accepting compliments on food and drink they'd had no hand in preparing.

Susan found it almost impossible to look at Olive's smiling, unhappy face. Her husband would never lie with Pat Delgado's daughter . . . but said Thorin didn't know that, and Susan couldn't tell her. She had only to glimpse the Mayor's wife from the corner of her eye to remember what Roland had said that day on the Drop: *For a moment I thought she was my mother.* But that was the problem, wasn't it? Olive Thorin was nobody's mother. That was what had opened the door to this horrible situation in the first place.

There had been something much on Susan's mind to do, but with the round of activities at Mayor's House, it was but three days to Reaping before she got the chance. Finally, following this latest Conversational, she was able to slip out of Pink Dress with Applique (how she hated it! how she hated them all!) and jump back into jeans, a plain riding shirt, and a ranch-coat. There was no time to braid

her hair, as she was expected back for Mayor's Tea, but Maria tied it back for her and off she had gone to the house she would shortly be leaving forever.

Her business was in the back room of the stable—the room her father had used as an office—but she went into the house first and heard what she'd hoped to hear: her aunt's ladylike, whistling snores. Lovely.

Susan got a slice of bread and honey and took it out to the barn-stable, protecting it as best she could from the clouds of dust that blew across the yard in the wind. Her aunt's stuffy-guy rattled on his post in the garden.

She ducked into the sweet-smelling shadows of the barn. Pylon and Felicia nickered hello, and she divided what she hadn't eaten between them. They seemed pleased enough to get it. She made especially of Felicia, whom she would soon be leaving behind.

She had avoided the little office since her father died, afraid of exactly the sort of pang that struck her when she lifted the latch and went in. The narrow windows were now covered with cobwebs, but they still let in autumn's bright light, more than enough for her to be able to see the pipe in the ashtray—the red one, his favorite, the one he called his thinking-pipe— and a bit of tack laid over the back of his desk chair. He had probably been mending it by gaslight, had put it by thinking to finish the next day ... then the snake had done its dance under Foam's hoofs and there had never been a next day. Not for Pat Delgado.

"Oh, Da," she said in a small and broken voice. "How I do miss thee."

She crossed to the desk and ran her fingers along its surface, leaving trails of dust. She sat down in his chair, listened to it creak under her as it had always creaked under him, and that pushed her over the edge. For the next five minutes she sat there and wept, screwing her fists into her eyes as she had as a wee shim. Only now, of course, there was no Big Pat to come upon her and jolly her out of it, taking her on his lap and kissing her in that sensitive place under her chin (especially sensitive to the bristles on his upper lip, it had been) until her tears turned to giggles. Time was a face on the water, and this time it was the face of her father.

At last her tears tapered to sniffles. She opened the desk drawers, one after another, finding more pipes (many rendered useless by his constant stem-chewing), a hat, one of her own dolls (it had a broken arm Pat had apparently never gotten around to putting right), quill-pens, a little flask— empty but with a

faint smell of whiskey still present around its neck. The only item of interest was in the bottom drawer: a pair of spurs. One still had its star rowel, but the other had been broken off. These were, she was almost positive, the spurs he had been wearing on the day he died.

*If my da was here, she had begun that day on the Drop. But he's not, Roland had said. He's dead.*

A pair of spurs, a broken-off rowel.

She bounced them in her hand, in her mind's eye seeing Ocean Foam rear, spilling her father (one spur catches in a stirrup; the rowel breaks free), then stumbling sideways and falling atop him. She saw this clearly, but she didn't see the snake Fran Lengyll had told them about. That she didn't see at all.

She put the spurs back where she had found them, got up, and looked at the shelf to the right of the desk, handy to Pat Delgado's smart hand. Here was a line of leather-bound ledgers, a priceless trove of books in a society that had forgotten how to make paper. Her father had been the man in charge of the Barony's horse for almost thirty years, and here were his stockline books to prove it.

Susan took down the last one and began to page through it. This time she almost welcomed the pang that struck her as she saw her father's familiar hand—the labored script, the steep and somehow more confident numbers.

Born of HENRIETTA, (2) foals both well

Stillborn of DELIA, a roan (MUTANT)

Born of YOLANDA, a THOROUGHBRED, a GOOD MALE COLT

And, following each, the date. So neat, he had been. So thorough. So ...

She stopped suddenly, aware that she had found what she was looking for even without any clear knowledge of what she was doing in here. The last dozen pages of her da's final stockline book had been torn out.

Who had done it? Not her father; a largely self-taught man, he revered paper the way some people revered gods or gold.

And why had it been done?

That she thought she knew: horses, of courses. There were too many on the Drop. And the ranchers—Lengyll, Croydon, Renfrew—were lying about the threaded quality of the stockline. So was Henry Wertner, the man who had succeeded to her

father's job.

*If my da was here—*

*But he's not. He's dead.*

She had told Roland she couldn't believe Fran Lengyll would lie about her father's death . . . but she could believe it now.

Gods help her, she could believe it now.

"What are ye doing in here?"

She gave a little scream, dropped the book, and whirled around. Cordelia stood there in one of her rusty black dresses. The top three buttons were undone, and Susan could see her aunt's collarbones sticking out above the plain white cotton of her shift. It was only on seeing those protruding bones that Susan realized how much weight Aunt Cord had lost over the last three months or so. She could see the red imprint of the pillow on her aunt's left cheek, like the mark of a slap. Her eyes glittered from dark, bruised-looking hollows of flesh.

"Aunt Cord! You startled me! You—"

"What are ye doing in here?" Aunt Cord repeated.

Susan bent and picked up the book. "I came to remember my father," she said, and put the book back on the shelf. Who had torn those pages out? Lengyll? Rimer? She doubted it. She thought it more likely that the woman standing before her right now had done it. Perhaps for as little as a single piece of red gold. *Nothing asked, nothing told, so all is well*, she would have thought, popping the coin into her money-box, after first biting its edge to make sure it was true.

"Remember him? It's ask his forgiveness, ye should do. For ye've forgotten his face, so ye have. Most grievous have ye forgotten it, Sue."

Susan only looked at her.

"Have ye been with *him* today?" Cordelia asked in a brittle, laughing voice. Her hand went to the red pillow-mark on her cheek and began rubbing it. She had been getting bad by degrees, Susan realized, but had become ever so much worse since the gossip about Jonas and Coral Thorin had started. "Have ye been with sai Dearborn? Is yer crack still dewy from his spend? Here, let me see for myself!" Her aunt glided forward—spectral in her black dress, her bodice open, her slippered feet peeping—and Susan pushed her back. In her fright and disgust, she pushed hard. Cordelia struck the wall beside the cobwebbed window.

"Ye should ask forgiveness yerself," Susan said. "To speak to his daughter so in

this place. *In this place.*" She let her eyes turn to the shelf of ledgers, then return to her aunt. The look of frightened calculation she saw on Cordelia Delgado's face told her all she wanted or needed to know. She hadn't been a party to her brother's murder, that Susan could not believe, but she had known something of it. Yes, something.

"Ye faithless bitch," Cordelia whispered.

"No," Susan said, "I have been true."

And so, she realized, she had been. A great weight seemed to slip off her shoulders at the thought. She walked to the door of the office and turned back to her aunt.

"I've slept my last night here," she said. "I'll not listen to more such as this. Nor look at ye as ye are now. It hurts my heart and steals the love I've kept for ye since I was little, when ye did the best ye could to be my ma."

Cordelia clapped her hands over her face, as if looking at Susan hurt her.

"Get out, then!" she screamed. "*Go back to Seafront or wherever it is thee rolls with that boy! If I never see thy trollop's face again, I'll count my life good!*"

Susan led Pylon from the stable. When she got him into the yard, she was sobbing almost too hard to mount up. Yet mount she did, and she couldn't deny that there was relief in her heart as well as sorrow. When she turned onto the High Street and booted Pylon into a gallop, she didn't look back.

## 9

In a dark hour of the following morning, Olive Thorin crept from the room where she now slept to the one she had shared for almost forty years with her husband. The floor was cold under her bare feet and she was shivering by the time she reached the bed ... but the chilly floor wasn't the only reason she was shivering. She slid in beside the gaunt, snoring man in the nightcap, and when he turned away from her (his knees and back crackling loudly as he did), she pressed against him and hugged him tightly. There was no passion in this, but only a need to share a bit of his warmth. His chest—narrow but almost as well-known to her as her own plump one—rose and fell under her hands, and she began to quiet a little. He stirred, and she thought for a moment he would wake and find her sharing his bed for the first time in gods knew how long.

*Yes, wake, she thought, do.* She didn't dare wake him of her own—all her courage

had been exhausted just getting here, creeping through the dark following one of the worst dreams she had ever had in her life—but if he woke, she would take it as a sign and tell him she had dreamed of a vast bird, a cruel golden-eyed roc that flew above the Barony on wings that dripped blood.

*Wherever its shadow fell, there was blood, she would tell him, and its shadow fell everywhere. The Barony ran with it, from Hambry all the way out to Eyebolt. And I swelled big fire in the wind. I ran to tell you and you were dead in your study, sitting by the hearth with your eyes gouged out and a skull in your lap.*

But instead of waking, in his sleep he took her hand, as he had used to, do before he had begun to look at the young girls—even the serving-wenches—when they passed, and Olive decided she would only lie here, and be still and let him hold her hand. Let it be like the old days for a bit, when everything had been right between them.

She slept a little herself. When she woke, dawn's first gray light was creeping in through the windows. He had dropped her hand—had, in fact, scooted away from her entirely, to his edge of the bed. It wouldn't do for him to wake and find her here, she decided, and the urgency of her night-mare was gone. She turned back the covers, swung her feet out, then looked at him once more. His nightcap had come askew. She put it right, her hands smoothing the cloth and the bony brow beneath. He stirred again. Olive waited until he had quieted, then got up. She slipped back to her own room like a phantom.

## 10

The midway booths opened in Green Heart two days before Reaping-Fair, and the first folks came to try their luck at the spinning wheel and the bottle-toss and the basket-ring. There was also a pony-train—a cart filled with laughing children, pulled along a figure eight of narrow-gauge rails.

("Was the pony named Charlie?" Eddie Dean asked Roland.

("I think not," Roland said. "We have a rather unpleasant word that sounds like that in the High Speech."

("What word?" Jake asked.

("The one," said the gunslinger, "that means death.")

Roy Depape stood watching the pony plod its appointed rounds for a couple of

turns, remembering with some nostalgia his own rides in such a cart as a child. Of course, most of his had been stolen.

When he had looked his fill, Depape sauntered on down to the Sheriff's office and went in. Herk Avery, Dave, and Frank Claypool were cleaning an odd and fantastical assortment of guns. Avery nodded at Depape and went back to what he was doing. There was something strange about the man, and after a moment or two Depape realized what it was: the Sheriff wasn't eating. It was the first time he'd ever come in here that the Sheriff didn't have a plate of grub close at hand.

"All ready for tomorrow?" Depape asked.

Avery gave him a half-irritated, half-smiling look. "What the hell kind of question is that?"

"One that Jonas sent me to ask," Depape said, and at that Avery's queer, nervy smile faltered a little.

"Aye, we're ready." Avery swept a meaty arm over the guns. "Don't ye see we are?"

Depape could have quoted the old saying about how the proof of the pudding was in the eating, but what was the point? Things would work out if the three boys were as fooled as Jonas thought they were; if they weren't fooled, they would likely carve Herk Avery's fat butt off the top of his legs and feed it to the handiest pack of wolverines. It didn't make much never mind to Roy Depape one way or the other.

"Jonas also ast me to remind you it's early."

"Aye, aye, we'll be there early," Avery agreed. "These two and six more good men. Fran Lengyll's asked to go along, and he's got a machine-gun." Avery spoke this last with ringing pride, as if he himself had invented the machine-gun. Then he looked at Depape slyly. "What about you, coffin-hand? Want to go along? Won't take me more'n an eyblink to deputize ye."

"I have another chore. Reynolds, too." Depape smiled. "There's plenty of work for all of us. Sheriff—after all, it's Reaping."

That afternoon, Susan and Roland met at the hut in the Bad Grass. She told him about the book with the torn-out pages, and Roland showed her what he'd left in



the hut's north corner, secreted beneath a mouldering pile of skins. She looked first at this, then at him with wide and frightened eyes. "What's wrong? What does thee *suspect is* wrong?"

He shook his head. *Nothing* was wrong ... not that he could tell, any-way. And yet he had felt a strong need to do what he'd done, to leave what he'd left. It wasn't the touch, nothing like it, but only intuition.

"I think everything is all right ... or as right as things can be when the odds may turn out fifty of them for each of us. Susan, our only chance is to take them by surprise. You're not going to risk that, are you? Not planning to go to Lengyll, waving your father's stockline book around?"

She shook her head. If Lengyll had done what she now suspected, he'd get his payback two days from now. There would be reaping, all right. Reaping aplenty. But this ... this frightened her, and she said so.

"Listen." Roland took her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. "I'm only trying to be careful. If things go badly—and they could—you're the one most likely to get away clean. You and Sheemie. If that happens, Susan, you—*thee*—must come here and take my guns. Take them west to Gilead. Find my father. He'll know thee are who thee says by what thee shows. Tell him what happened here. That's all."

"If anything happens to thee, Roland, I won't be able to do anything. Except die." His hands were still on her face. Now he used them to make her head shake slowly, from side to side. "You won't die," he said. There was a coldness in his voice and eyes that struck her not with fear but awe. She thought of his blood—of how old it must be, and how cold it must some-times flow. "Not with this job undone. Promise me."

"I... I promise, Roland. I do."

"Tell me aloud what you promise."

"I'll come here. Get yer guns. Take them to yer da. Tell him what happened."

He nodded and let go of her face. The shapes of his hands were printed faintly on her cheeks.

"Ye frightened me," Susan said, and then shook her head. That wasn't right. "Ye *do* frighten me."

"I can't help what I am."

"And I wouldn't change it." She kissed his left cheek, his right cheek, his mouth.

She put her hand inside his shirt and caressed his nipple. It grew instantly hard beneath the tip of her finger. "Bird and bear and hare and fish," she said, now making soft butterfly kisses all over his face. "Give your love her fondest wish." After, they lay beneath a bearskin Roland had brought along and listened to the wind sough through the grass.

"I love that sound," she said. "It always makes me wish I could be part of the wind ... go where it goes, see what it sees."

"This year, if *ka* allows, you will."

"Aye. And with thee." She turned to him, up on one elbow. Light fell through the ruined roof and dappled her face. "Roland, I love thee." She kissed him . . . and then began to cry.

He held her, concerned. "What is it? Sue, what troubles thee?"

"I don't know," she said, crying harder. "All I know is that there's a shadow on my heart." She looked at him with tears still flowing from her eyes. "Thee'd not leave me, would ye, dear? Thee'd not go without Sue, would ye?"

"No."

"For I've given all I have to ye, so I have. And my virginity's the very least of it, thee knows."

"I'd never leave you." But he felt cold in spite of the bearskin, and the wind outside—so comforting a moment ago—sounded like beast's breath. "Never, I swear."

"I'm frightened, though. Indeed I am."

"You needn't be," he said, speaking slowly and carefully ... for suddenly all the wrong words wanted to come tumbling out of his mouth. *We 'll leave this, Susan—not day after tomorrow, on Reaping, but now, this minute. Dress and we'll go crosswise to the wind; it's south we'll ride and never look back. We'll be—*—haunted.

That's what they would be. Haunted by the faces of Alain and Cuthbert; haunted by the faces of all the men who might die in the Shaved Mountains, massacred by weapons torn from the armory-crypts where they should have been left. Haunted most of all by the faces of their fathers, for all the rest of their lives. Not even the South Pole would be far enough to escape those faces.

"All you need do day after tomorrow is claim indisposition at lunch." They had gone over all this before, but now, in his sudden, pointless fright, it was all he

could think of to say. "Go to your room, then leave as you did on the night we met in the graveyard. Hide up a little. Then, when it's three o' the clock, ride here, and look under the skins in yon comer. If my guns are gone—and they will be, I swear they will—then everything's all right. You'll ride to meet us. Come to the place above the canyon, the one we told you of. We'll—"

"Aye, I know all that, but something's wrong." She looked at him, touched the side of his face. "I fear for thee and me, Roland, and know not why."

"All will work out," he said. "*Ka*—"

"Speak not to me of *ka*!" she cried. "Oh please don't! *Ka* like a wind, my father said, it takes what it will and minds the plea of no man or woman. Greedy old *ka*, how I hate it!"

"Susan—"

"No, say no more." She lay back and pushed the bearskin down to her knees, exposing a body that far greater men than Hart Thorin might have given away kingdoms for. Beads of sunlight ran over her bare skin like rain. She held her arms out to him. Never had she looked more beautiful to Roland than she did then, with her hair spread about her and that haunted look on her face. He would think later: *She knew. Some part of her knew.*

"No more talking," she said. "Talking's done. If you love me, then love me." And for the last time, Roland did. They rocked together, skin to skin and breath to breath, and outside the wind roared into the west like a tidal wave.



12

That evening, as the grinning Demon rose in the sky, Cordelia left her house and walked slowly across the lawn to her garden, detouring around the pile of leaves she had raked that afternoon. In her arms was a bundle of clothes. She dropped them in front of the pole to which her stuffy-guy was bound, then looked raptly up at the rising moon: the knowing wink of the eye, the ghoulish grin; silver as bone was that moon, a white button against violet silk. It grinned at Cordelia; Cordelia grinned back. Finally, with the air of a woman awakening from a trance, she stepped forward and pulled the stuffy-guy off its

pole. His head lolled limply against her shoulder, like the head of a man who has found himself too drunk to dance. His red hands dangled.

She stripped off the guy's clothes, uncovering a bulging, vaguely humanoid shape in a pair of her dead brother's longhandles. She took one of the things she had brought from the house and held it up to the moonlight. A red silk riding shirt, one of Mayor Thorin's presents to Miss Oh So Young and Pretty. One of those she wouldn't wear. Whore's clothes, she had called them. And what did that make Cordelia Delgado, who had taken care of her even after her bullheaded da had decided he must stand against the likes of Fran Lengyll and John Croydon? It made her a whore-house madam, she supposed.

This thought led to an image of Eldred Jonas and Coral Thorin, naked and striving while a honky-tonk piano planked out "Red Dirt Boogie" be-low them, and Cordelia moaned like a dog.

She yanked the silk shirt over the stuffy's head. Next came one of Susan's split riding skirts. After the skirt, a pair of her slippers. And last, replacing the *sombrero*, one of Susan's spring bonnets.

Presto! The stuffy-guy was now a stuffy-gal.

"And caught red-handed ye are," she whispered. "I know. Oh yes, I know. I wasn't born yesterday."

She carried the stuffy from the garden to the pile of leaves on the lawn. She laid it close by the leaves, then scooped some up and pushed them into the bodice of the riding shirt, making rudimentary breasts. That done, she took a match from her pocket and struck it alight.

The wind, as if eager to cooperate, dropped. Cordelia touched the match to the dry leaves. Soon the whole pile was blazing. She picked the stuffy-gal up in her arms and stood with it in front of the fire. She didn't hear the rattling firecrackers from town, or the wheeze of the steam-organ in Green Heart, or the mariachi band playing in the Low Market; when a burning leaf rose and swirled past her hair, threatening to set it alight, she didn't seem to notice. Her eyes were wide and blank.

When the fire was at its height, she stepped to its edge and threw the stuffy on. Flame whumped up around it in bright orange gusts; sparks and burning leaves swirled skyward in a funnel.

"So let it be done!" Cordelia cried. The firelight on her face turned her tears to

blood. "*Charyou tree! Aye, just so!*"

The thing in the riding clothes caught fire, its face charring, its red hands blazing, its white-cross eyes turning black. Its bonnet flared; the face began to bum. Cordelia stood and watched, fists clenching and unclenching, heed-less of the sparks that lit on her skin, heedless of the blazing leaves that swirled toward the house. Had the house caught fire, she would likely have ignored that as well. She watched until the stuffy dressed in her niece's clothes was nothing but ashes lying atop more ashes. Then, as slowly as a robot with rust in its works, she walked back to the house, lay down on the sofa, and slept like the dead.

### 13

It was three-thirty in the morning of the day before Reaping, and Stanley Ruiz thought he was finally done for the night. The last music had quit twenty minutes ago—Sheb had outlasted the mariachis by an hour or so, and now lay snoring with his face in the sawdust. Sai Thorin was upstairs, and there had been no sign of the Big Coffin Hunters; Stanley had an idea those were up to Seafront tonight. He also had an idea there was black work on offer, although he didn't know that for sure. He looked up at the glassy, two-headed gaze of The Romp. "Nor want to, old pal," he said. "All I want is about nine hours of sleep—tomorrow comes the real party, and they won't leave till dawn. So—"

A shrill scream rose from somewhere behind the building. Stanley jerked backward, thumping into the bar. Beside the piano, Sheb raised his head briefly, muttered "Wuzzat?" and dropped it back with a thump.

Stanley had absolutely no urge to investigate the source of the scream, but he supposed he would, just the same. It had sounded like that sad old bitch Pettie the Trotter. "I'd like to trot your saggy old ass right out of town," he muttered, then bent down to look under the bar. There were two stout ashwood clubs here, The Calmer and The Killer. The Calmer was smooth buried wood, guaranteed to put out the lights for two hours any time you tapped some boisterous cull's head in the right place with it.

Stanley consulted his feelings and took the other club. It was shorter than The Calmer, wider at the top. And the business end of The Killer was studded with nails.

Stanley went down to the end of the bar, through the door, and across a dim supply-room stacked with barrels smelling of *graf* and whiskey. At the rear was a door giving on the back yard. Stanley approached it, took a deep breath, and unlocked it. He kept expecting Pettie to voice an-other head-bursting scream, but none came. There was only the sound of the wind.

*Maybe you got lucky and she's kilt*, Stanley thought. He opened the door, stepping back and raising the nail-studded club at the same time.

Pettie wasn't kilt. Dressed in a stained shift (a Pettie-skirt, one might say), the whore was standing on the path which led to the back privy, her hands clutched together above the swell of her bosom and below the drooping turkey-wattles of her neck. She was looking up at the sky.

"What is it?" Stanley asked, hurrying down to her. "Near scared ten years off my life, ye did."

"The moon, Stanley!" she whispered. "Oh, look at the moon, would ye!"

He looked up, and what he saw set his heart thumping, but he tried to speak reasonably and calmly. "Come now, Pettie, it's dust, that's all. Be reasonable, dear, ye know how the wind's blown these last few days, and no rain to knock down what it carries; it's dust, that's all."

Yet it didn't look like dust.

"I know what I see," whispered Pettie.

Above them, Demon Moon grinned and winked one eye through what appeared to be a shifting scrim of blood.

## CHAPTER VII

# TAKING THE BALL

While a certain whore and certain bartender were still gaping up at the bloody moon, Kimba Rimer awoke sneezing.

*Damn, a cold for Reaping,* he thought. *As much as I have to be out over the next two days, I'll be lucky if it doesn't turn into—*

Something fluffed the end of his nose, and he sneezed again. Coming out of his narrow chest and dry slot of a mouth, it sounded like a small-caliber pistol-shot in the black room.

"Who's there?" he cried.

No answer. Rimer suddenly imagined a bird, something nasty and bad-tempered, that had gotten in here in daylight and was now flying around in the dark, fluttering against his face as he slept. His skin crawled—birds, bugs, bats, he hated them all—and he fumbled so energetically for the gas-lamp on the table by his bed that he almost knocked it off onto the floor.

As he drew it toward him, that flutter came again. This time puffing at his cheek. Rimer screamed and recoiled against the pillows, clutching the lamp to his chest. He turned the switch on the side, heard the hiss of gas, then pushed the spark. The lamp lit, and in the thin circle of its radiance, he saw not a fluttering bird but Clay Reynolds sitting on the edge of the bed. In one hand Reynolds held the feather with which he had been tick-ling Mejia's Chancellor. His other was hidden in his cloak, which lay in his lap.

Reynolds had disliked Rimer from their first meeting in the woods far west of town—those same woods, beyond Eyebolt Canyon, where Far-son's man Latigo now quartered the main contingent of his troops. It had been a windy night, and as he and the other Coffin Hunters entered the little glade where Rimer, accompanied by Lengyll and Croydon, were sitting by a small fire, Reynolds's cloak swirled around him. "*Sai Manto,*" Rimer had said, and the other two had laughed. It had been meant as a harmless joke, but it hadn't seemed harmless to Reynolds. In many of the lands where he had travelled, *manto* meant not "cloak" but "leaner" or "bender." It was, in fact, a slang term for homosexual. That Rimer (a provincial man under his veneer of cynical sophistication) didn't know this never crossed Reynolds's mind. He knew when people were making small of him, and if he could make such a person pay, he did so.



For Kimba Rimer, payday had come.

"Reynolds? What are you doing? How did you get in h—"

"You got to be thinking of the wrong cowboy," the man sitting on the bed replied.

"No Reynolds here. Just *Senor Manto*." He took out the hand which had been under his cloak. In it was a keenly honed *cuchillo*. Reynolds had purchased it in Low Market with this chore in mind. He raised it now and drove the twelve-inch blade into Rimer's chest. It went all the way through, pinning him like a bug. A *bedbug*, Reynolds thought.

The lamp fell out of Rimer's hands and rolled off the bed. It landed on the foot-runner, but did not break. On the far wall was Kimba Rimer's distorted, struggling shadow. The shadow of the other man bent over it like a hungry vulture.

Reynolds lifted the hand which had held the knife. He turned it so the small blue tattooed coffin between thumb and forefinger was in front of Rimer's eyes. He wanted it to be the last thing Rimer saw on this side of the clearing.

"Let's hear you make fun of me now," Reynolds said. He smiled. "Come on. Let's just hear you."

## 2

Shortly before five o'clock, Mayor Thorin woke from a terrible dream. In it, a bird with pink eyes had been cruising slowly back and forth above the Barony. Wherever its shadow fell, the grass turned yellow, the leaves fell shocked from the trees, and the crops died. The shadow was turning his green and pleasant Barony into a waste land. *It may be my Barony, but it's my bird, too*, he thought just before awakening, huddled into a shuddery ball on one side of his bed. *My bird, I brought it here, I let it out of its cage.*

There would be no more sleep for him this night, and Thorin knew it. He poured himself a glass of water, drank it, then walked into his study, absently picking his nightgown from the cleft of his bony old ass as he went. The puff on the end of his nightcap bobbed between his shoulder blades; his knees cracked at every step.

As for the guilty feelings expressed by the dream . . . well, what was done was done. Jonas and his friends would have what they'd come for (and paid so handsomely for) in another day; a day after that, they'd be gone. Fly away, bird with the pink eyes and pestilent shadow; fly away to wherever you came from and

take the Big Coffin Boys with you. He had an idea that by Year's End he'd be too busy dipping his wick to think much about such things. Or to dream such dreams. Besides, dreams without visible sign were just dreams, not omens.

The visible sign might have been the boots beneath the study drapes—just the scuffed tips of them showing—but Thorin never looked in that direction. His eyes were fixed on the bottle beside his favorite chair. Drinking claret at five in the morning was no sort of habit to get into, but this once wouldn't hurt. He'd had a terrible dream, for gods' sake, and after all—

"Tomorrow's Reaping," he said, sitting in the wing-chair on the edge of the hearth.

"I guess a man can jump a fence or two, come Reap."

He poured himself a drink, the last he'd ever take in this world, and coughed as the fire hit his belly and then climbed back up his throat, warming it. Better, aye, much. No giant birds now, no plaguey shadows. He stretched out his arms, laced his long and bony fingers together, and cracked them viciously.

"I *hate* it when you do that, you scrawny git," spoke a voice directly into Thorin's left ear.

Thorin jumped. His heart took its own tremendous leap in his chest. The empty glass flew from his hand, and there was no foot-runner to cushion its landing. It smashed on the hearth.

Before Thorin could scream, Roy Depape brushed off the mayoral nightcap, seized the gauzy remains of the mayoral mane, and yanked the mayoral head back. The knife Depape held in his other hand was much humbler than the one Reynolds had used, but it cut the old man's throat efficiently enough. Blood sprayed scarlet in the dim room. Depape let go of Thorin's hair, went back to the drapes he had been hiding behind, and picked something up off the floor. It was Cuthbert's lookout. Depape brought it back to the chair and put it in the dying Mayor's lap. "Bird . . ." Thorin gargled through a mouthful of blood. "Bird!"

"Yar, old fella, and trig o' you to notice at a time like this, I will say." Depape pulled Thorin's head back again and took the old man's eyes out with two quick flips of his knife. One went into the dead fireplace; the other hit the wall and slid down behind the fire-tools. Thorin's right foot trembled briefly and was still.

One more job to do.

Depape looked around, saw Thorin's nightcap, and decided the ball on the end would serve. He picked it up, dipped it in the puddle of blood in the Mayor's lap,

and drew the Good Man's *sigul*—



—on the wall.

"There," he murmured, standing back. "If that don't finish em, noth-ing on earth will."

True enough. The only question left unanswered was whether or not Roland's *ka-tet* could be taken alive.

### 3

Jonas had told Fran Lengyll exactly where to place his men, two inside the stable and six more out, three of these latter gents hidden behind rusty old implements, two hidden in the burnt-out remains of the home place, one—Dave Hollis—crouched on top of the stable itself, spying over the roofpeak. Lengyll was glad to see that the men in the posse took their job seriously. They were only boys, it was true, but boys who had on one oc-casion come off ahead of the Big Coffin Hunters.

Sheriff Avery gave a fair impression of being in charge of things until they got within a good shout of the Bar K. Then Lengyll, machine-gun slung over one shoulder (and as straight-hacked in the saddle as he had been at twenty), took command. Avery, who looked nervous and sounded out of breath, seemed relieved rather than offended.

"I'll tell ye where to go as was (old to me, for it's a good plan, and I've no quarrel with it," Lengyll had told his posse. In the dark, their faces were little more than dim blurs. "Only one thing I'll say to ye on my own hook. We don't need em alive, but it's best we have em so—it's the Barony we want to put paid to em, the common folk, and so put paid to this whole business, as well. Shut the door on it, if ye will. So I say this: if there's cause to shoot, shoot. But I'll flay the skin off the face of any man who shoots without cause. Do ye understand?"

No response. It seemed they did.

"All right," Lengyll had said. His face was stony. "I'll give ye a minute to make

sure your gear's muffled, and then on we go. Not another' word from here on out."

4

Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain came out of the bunkhouse at quarter past six that morning, and stood a-row on the porch. Alain was finishing his coffee. Cuthbert was yawning and stretching. Roland was buttoning his shirt and looking southwest, toward the Bad Grass. He was thinking not of ambushes but of Susan. Her tears. *Greedy old ka, how I hate it*, she had said.

His instincts did not awake; Alain's touch, which had sensed Jonas on the day Jonas had killed the pigeons, did not so much as quiver. As for Cuthbert—"One more day of quiet!" that worthy exclaimed to the dawning sky. "One more day of grace! One more day of silence, broken only by the lover's sigh and the tattoo of horses' hoofs!"

"One more day of your bullshit," Alain said. "Come on."

They set off across the dooryard, sensing the eight pairs of eyes on them not at all. They walked into the stable past the two men flanking the door, one hidden behind an ancient harrow, the other tucked behind an untidy stack of hay, both with guns drawn.

Only Rusher sensed something was wrong. He stamped his feet, rolled his eyes, and, as Roland backed him out of his stall, tried to rear.

"Hey, boy," he said, and looked around. "Spiders, I reckon. He hates them."

Outside, Lengyll stood up and waved both hands forward. Men moved silently toward the front of the stable. On the roof, Dave Hollis stood with his gun drawn. His monocle was tucked away in his vest pocket, so it should blink no badly timed reflection.

Cuthbert led his mount out of the stable. Alain followed. Roland came last, short-leading the nervous, prancy gelding.

"Look," Cuthbert said cheerily, still unaware of the men standing directly behind him and his friends. He was pointing north. "A cloud in the shape of a bear! Good luck for—"

"Don't move, cullies," Fran Lengyll called. "Don't so much as shuffle yer god-pounding feet."

Alain *did* begin to turn—in startlement more than anything else—and there was a

ripple of small clicking sounds, like many dry twigs all snap-ping at once. The sound of cocking pistols and musketoons.

"No, Al!" Roland said. "Don't move! Don't!" In his throat despair rose like poison, and tears of rage stung at the comers of his eyes ... yet he stood quiet. Cuthbert and Alain must stand quiet, too. If they moved, they'd be killed. "Don't move!" he called again. "Either of you!"

"Wise, cully." Lengyll's voice was closer now, and accompanied by several pairs of footfalls. "Put yer hands behind ye."

Two shadows flanked Roland, long in the first light. Judging by the bulk of the one on his left, he guessed it was being thrown by Sheriff Avery. He probably wouldn't be offering them any white tea this day. Lengyll would belong to the other shadow.

"Hurry up, Dearborn, or whatever yer name may be. Get em behind ye. Small of yer back. There's guns pointed at your pards, and if we end up taking in only two of yer instead of three, life'll go on."

*Not taking any chances with us*, Roland thought, and felt a moment of perverse pride. With it came a taste of something that was almost amuse-ment. Bitter, though; that taste continued very bitter.

"Roland!" It was Cuthbert, and there was agony in his voice. "Ro-land, don't!" But there was no choice. Roland put his hands behind his back. Rusher uttered a small, reproving whinny as if to say all this was *highly* improper—and trotted away to stand beside the bunkhouse porch.

"You're going to feel metal on your wrists," Lengyll said. "*Esposas*."

Two cold circles slipped over Roland's hands. I here was a click and suddenly the arcs of the handcuffs were tight against his wrists.

"All right," said another voice. "Now you, son,"

"Be damned if I will!" Cuthbert's voice wavered on the edge of hysteria

There was a thud and a muffled cry of pain. Roland turned around and saw Alain down on one knee, the heel of his left hand pressed against his forehead. Blood ran down his face.

"Ye want me to deal him another 'un?" Jake White asked. He had an old pistol in his hand, reversed so the butt was forward. "I can, you know; my arm is feeling wery limber for this early in the day."

"No!" Cuthbert was twitching with horror and something like grief. Ranged

behind him were three armed men, looking on with nervous avidity.

"Then be a good boy an' get yer hands behind yer."

Cuthbert, still fighting tears, did as he was told. *Esposas* were put on him by Deputy Bridger. The other two men yanked Alain to his feet. He reeled a little, then stood firm as he was handcuffed. His eyes met Roland's, and Al tried to smile. In some ways it was the worst moment of that terrible ambush morning. Roland nodded back and made himself a promise: he would never be taken like this again, not if he lived to be a thousand years old.

Lengyll was wearing a trailscarf instead of a string tie this morning, but Roland thought he was inside the same box-tail coat he'd worn to the Mayor's welcoming party, all those weeks ago. Standing beside him, puffing with excitement, anxiety, and self-importance, was Sheriff Avery.

"Boys," the Sheriff said, "ye're arrested for transgressing the Barony. The specific charges are treason and murder."

"Who did we murder?" Alain asked mildly, and one of the posse uttered a laugh either shocked or cynical, Roland couldn't tell which.

"The Mayor and his Chancellor, as ye know quite well," Avery said. "Now—"

"How can you do this?" Roland asked curiously. It was Lengyll to whom he spoke. "Mejis is your home place; I've seen the line of your fathers in the town cemetery. How can you do this to your home place, sai Lengyll?"

"I've no intention of standing out here and making palaver with ye," Lengyll said. He glanced over Roland's shoulder. "Alvarez! Get his horse! Boys as trig as this bunch should have no problem riding with their hands behind their—"

"No, tell me," Roland interposed. "Don't hold back, sai Lengyll— these are your friends you've come with, and not a one who isn't inside your circle. How can you do it? Would you rape your own mother if you came upon her sleeping with her dress up?"

Lengyll's mouth twitched—not with shame or embarrassment but momentary prudish distaste, and then the old rancher looked at Avery. "They teach em to talk pretty in Gilead, don't they?"

Avery had a rifle. Now he stepped toward the handcuffed gunslinger with the butt raised. "I'll teach 'im how to talk proper to a man of the gen-try, so I will! Knock the teef straight out of his head, if you say aye, Fran!"

Lengyll held him back, looking tired. "Don't be a fool. I don't want to bring him

back laying over a saddle unless he's dead."

Avery lowered his gun. Lengyll turned to Roland.

"Ye're not going to live long enough to profit from advice, Dear-born," he said, "but I'll give'ee some, anyway: stick with the winners in this world. And know how the wind blows, so ye can tell when it changes direction."

"You've forgotten the face of your father, you scurrying little mag-got," Cuthbert said clearly.

This got to Lengyll in a way Roland's remark about his mother had not—it showed in the sudden bloom of color in his weathered cheeks.

"Get em mounted!" he said. "I want em locked up tight within the hour!"

## 5

Roland was boosted into Rusher's saddle so hard he almost flew off on the other side—would have, if Dave Hollis had not been there to steady him and then to wedge Roland's boot into the stirrup. Dave offered the gunslinger a nervous, half-embarrassed smile.

"I'm sorry to see you here," Roland said gravely.

"It's sorry I am to be here," the deputy said. "If murder was your busi-ness, I wish you'd gotten to it sooner. And your friend shouldn't have been so arrogant as to leave his calling-card." He nodded toward Cuthbert.

Roland hadn't the slightest idea what Deputy Dave was referring to, but it didn't matter. It was just part of the frame, and none of these men believed much of it, Dave likely included. Although, Roland supposed, they would come to believe it in later years and tell it to their children and grandchildren as gospel. The glorious day they'd ridden with the posse and taken down the traitors.

The gunslinger used his knees to turn Rusher . . . and there, standing by the gate between the Bar K's dooryard and the lane leading to the Great Road, was Jonas himself. He sat astride a deep-chested bay, wear-ing a green felt drover's hat and an old gray duster. There was a rifle in the scabbard beside his right knee. The left side of the duster was pulled back to expose the butt of his revolver. Jonas's white hair, untied today, lay over his shoulders.

He doffed his hat and held it out to Roland in courtly greeting. "A good game," he said. "You played very well for someone who was taking his milk out of a tit not

so long ago."

"Old man," Roland said, "you've lived too long."

Jonas smiled. "You'd remedy that if you could, wouldn't you? Yar, I reckon." He flicked his eyes at Lengyll. "Get their toys, Fran. Look specially sharp for knives. They've got guns, but not with em. Yet I know a bit more about those shooting irons than they might think. And funny boy's slingshot. Don't forget that, for gods' sake. He like to take Roy's head off with it not so long ago."

"Are you talking about the carrot-top?" Cuthbert asked. His horse was dancing under him; Bert swayed back and forth and from side to side like a circus rider to keep from tumbling off. "He never would have missed his head. His balls, maybe, but not his head."

"Probably true," Jonas agreed, watching as the spears and Roland's shortbow were taken into custody. The slingshot was on the back of Cuthbert's belt, tucked into a holster he had made for it himself. It was very well for Roy Depape that he hadn't tried Bert, Roland knew—Bert could take a bird on the wing at sixty yards. A pouch holding steel shot hung at the boy's left side. Bridger took it, as well. While this was going on, Jonas fixed Roland with an amiable smile. "What's your real name, brat? Fess up—no harm in telling now; you're going to ride the handsome, and we both know it."

Roland said nothing. Lengyll looked at Jonas, eyebrows raised. Jonas shrugged, then jerked his head in the direction of town. Lengyll nodded and poked Roland with one hard, chapped finger. "Come on, boy. Let's ride."

Roland squeezed Rusher's sides; the horse trotted toward Jonas. And suddenly Roland knew something. As with all his best and truest intuitions, it came from nowhere and everywhere—absent at one second, all there and fully dressed at the next.

"Who sent you west, maggot?" he asked as he passed Jonas. "Couldn't have been Cort—you're too old. Was it his father?"

The look of slightly bored amusement left Jonas's face—*flew* from his face, as if slapped away. For one amazing moment the man with the white hair was a child again: shocked, shamed, and hurt.

"Yes, Cort's da—I see it in your eyes. And now you're here, on the Clean Sea ... except you're really in the west. The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west."



Jonas's gun was out and cocked in his hand with such speed that only Roland's extraordinary eyes were capable of marking the movement. There was a murmur from the men behind them—partly shock, mostly awe.

"Jonas, don't be a fool!" Lengyll snarled. "You ain't killin em after we took the time and risk to hood em and tie their hooks, are ye?"

Jonas seemed to take no notice. His eyes were wide; the comers of his seamed mouth were trembling. "Watch your words, Will Dearborn," he said in a low, hoarse voice. "You want to watch em ever so close. I got two pounds of pressure on a three-pound trigger right this second."

"Fine, shoot me," Roland said. He lifted his head and looked down at Jonas.

"Shoot, exile. Shoot, worm. Shoot, you failure. You'll still live in exile and die as you lived."

For a moment he was sure Jonas *would* shoot, and in that moment Roland felt death would be enough, an acceptable end after the shame of being caught so easily. In that moment Susan was absent from his mind. Nothing breathed in that moment, nothing called, nothing moved. The shadows of the men watching this confrontation, both on foot and on horseback, were printed depthless on the dirt. Then Jonas dropped the hammer of his gun and slipped it back into its holster.

"Take em to town and jug em," he said to Lengyll. "And when I show up, I don't want to see one hair harmed on one head. If I could keep from killing this one, you can keep from hurting the rest. Now go on."

"Move," Lengyll said. His voice had lost some of its bluff authority. It was now the voice of a man who realizes (too late) that he has bought chips in a game where the stakes are likely much too high.

They rode. As they did, Roland turned one last time. The contempt Jonas saw in those cool young eyes stung him worse than the whips that had scarred his back in Garlan years ago.

## 6

When they were out of sight, Jonas went into the bunkhouse, pulled up the board which concealed their little armory, and found only two guns. The matched set of six-shooters with the dark handles—Dearborn's guns, surely—were gone.

*You 're in the west. The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west. You'll*

*live in exile and die as you lived.*

Jonas's hands went to work, disassembling the revolvers Cuthbert and Alain had brought west. Alain's had never even been worn, save on the practice-range. Outside, Jonas threw the pieces, scattering them every which way. He threw as hard as he could, trying to rid himself of that cool blue gaze and the shock of hearing what he'd believed no man had known. Roy and Clay suspected, but even they hadn't known for sure.

Before the sun went down, everyone in Mejis would know that Eldred Jonas, the white-haired regulator with the tattooed coffin on his hand, was nothing but a failed gunslinger.

*You'll live in exile and die as you lived.*

"P'raps," he said, looking at the burned-out ranch house without really seeing it. "But I'll live longer than you, young Dearborn, and die long after your bones are rusting in the ground."

He mounted up and swung his horse around, sawing viciously at the reins. He rode for Citgo, where Roy and Clay would be waiting, and he rode hard, but Roland's eyes rode with him.

7

"Wake up! Wake up, sai! Wake up! Wake up!"

At first the words seemed to be coming from far away, drifting down by some magical means to the dark place where she lay. Even when the voice was joined by a rudely shaking hand and Susan knew she *must* wake up, it was a long, hard struggle.

It had been weeks since she'd gotten a decent night's sleep, and she had expected more of the same last night. . . *especially* last night. She had lain awake in her luxurious bedchamber at Seafront, tossing from side to side, possibilities—none good—crowding her mind. The nightgown she wore crept up to her hips and bunched at the small of her back. When she got up to use the commode, she took the hateful thing off, hurled it into a corner, and crawled back into bed naked. Being out of the heavy silk nightgown had done the trick. She dropped off almost at once . . . and in this case, *dropped off was*, exactly right: it was less like falling asleep than falling into some thoughtless, dreamless crack in the earth.

Now this intruding voice. This intruding arm, shaking her so hard that her head rolled from side to side on the pillow. Susan tried to slide away from it, pulling her knees up to her chest and mouthing fuzzy protests, but the arm followed. The shaking recommenced; the nagging, calling voice never stopped.

"Wake up, sai! Wake up! In the name of the Turtle and the Bear, wake up!" Maria's voice. Susan hadn't recognized it at first because Maria was so upset. Susan had never heard her so, or expected to. Yet it *was so*; the maid sounded on the verge of hysteria.

Susan sat up. For a moment so much input—all of it wrong—crashed in on her that she was incapable of moving. The duvet beneath which she had slept tumbled into her lap, exposing her breasts, and she could do no more than pluck weakly at it with the tips of her fingers.

The first wrong thing was the light. It flooded through the windows more strongly than it ever had before . . . because, she realized, she had never been in this room so late before. Gods, it had to be ten o' the clock, perhaps later.

The second wrong thing was the sounds from below. Mayor's House was ordinarily a peaceful place in the morning; until noon one heard little but *casa vaqueros* leading the horses out for their morning exercise, the whicker-whicker-whick of Miguel sweeping the courtyard, and the con-stant boom and shush of the waves. This morning there were shouts, curses, galloping horses, the occasional burst of strange, jagged laughter. Somewhere outside her room—perhaps not in this wing, but close— Susan heard the running thud of booted feet.

The wrongest thing of all was Maria herself, cheeks ashy beneath her olive skin-tone, and her usually neat hair tangled and unbound. Susan would have guessed only an earthquake could make her look so, if that.

"Maria, what is it?"

"You have to go, sai. Seafront maybe not safe for you just now. Your own house maybe better. When I don't see you earlier, I think you gone there already. You chose a bad day to sleep late."

"Go?" Susan asked. Slowly, she pulled the duvet all the way up to her nose and stared at Maria over it with wide, puffy eyes. "What do you mean, go?"

"Out the back." Maria plucked the duvet from Susan's sleep-numbed hands again and this time stripped it all the way down to her ankles. "Like you did before. Now, missy, now! Dress and go! Those boys put away, aye, but what if they have

friends? What if they come back, kill you, too?"

Susan had been getting up. Now all the strength ran out of her legs and she sat back down on the bed again. "Boys?" she whispered. "Boys kill who? *Boys kill who?*"

This was a good distance from grammatical, but Maria took her meaning.

"Dearborn and his pinboys," she said.

"Who are they supposed to have killed?"

"The Mayor and the Chancellor." She looked at Susan with a kind of distracted sympathy. "Now get up, I tell you. And get gone. This place gone *loco*."

"They didn't do any such thing," Susan said, and only just restrained herself from adding, *It wasn't in the plan*.

"Sai Thorin and sai Rimer jus' as dead, whoever did it." There were more shouts below, and a sharp little explosion that didn't sound like a firecracker. Maria looked in that direction, then began to throw Susan her clothes. "The Mayor's eyes, they gouged right out of his head."

"They couldn't have! Maria, I know them—"

"Me, I don't know nothing about them and care less—but I care about you. Get dressed and get out, I tell you. Quick as you can."

"What's happened to them?" A terrible thought came to Susan and she leaped to her feet, clothes falling all around her. She seized Maria by the shoulders. "They haven't been killed?" Susan shook her. "Say they haven't been killed!"

"I don't think so. There's been a t'ousan' shouts and ten t'ousan' ru-mors go the rounds, but I think jus' jailed. Only . . ."

There was no need for her to finish; her eyes slipped from Susan's, and that involuntary shift (along with the confused shouts from below) told all the rest. Not killed yet, but Hart Thorin had been greatly liked, and from an old family. Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain were strangers.

Not killed yet ... but tomorrow was Reaping, and tomorrow night was Reaping Bonfire.

Susan began to dress as fast as she could.

Reynolds, who had been with Jonas longer than Depape, took one look at the

figure cantering toward them through the skeletal oil derricks, and turned to his partner. "Don't ask him any questions—he's not in any mood for silly questions this morning."

"How do you know?"

"Never mind. Just keep your ever-fucking gob shut."

Jonas reined up before them. He sat slumped in his saddle, pale and thoughtful. His look prompted one question from Roy Depape in spite of Reynolds's caution.

"Eldred, are you all right?"

"Is anyone?" Jonas responded, then fell silent again. Behind them, Citgo's few remaining pumpers squalled tiredly.

At last Jonas roused himself and sat a little straighter in the saddle. "The cubs'll be stored supplies by now. I told Lengyll and Avery to fire a double set of pistol-shots if anything went wrong, and there hasn't been any shooting like that."

"We didn't hear none, either, Eldred," Depape said eagerly. "Nothing at all like that."

Jonas grimaced. "You wouldn't, would you? Not out in this noise.

Fool!"

Depape bit his lip, saw something in the neighborhood of his left stir-rup that needed adjusting, and bent to it.

"Were you boys seen at your business?" Jonas asked. "This morning, I mean, when you sent Rimer and Thorin off. Even a chance either of you was seen?"

Reynolds shook his head for both of them. " 'Twas clean as could be."

Jonas nodded as if the subject had been of only passing interest to him, then turned to regard the oilpatch and the rusty derricks. "Mayhap folks are right," he said in a voice almost too low to hear. "Mayhap the Old People *were* devils." He turned back to them. "Well, we're the devils now. Ain't we. Clay?"

"Whatever you think, Eldred," Reynolds said.

"I said what I think. *We're* the devils now, and by God, that's how we'll behave. What about Quint and that lot down there?" He cocked his head toward the forested slope where the ambush had been laid.

"Still there, pending your word," Reynolds said.

"No need of em now." He favored Reynolds with a dark look. "That Dearborn's a coozey brat. I wish I was going to be in Hambry tomorrow night just so I could lay a torch between his feet. I almost left him cold and dead at the Bar K. Would've if

not for Lengyll. Coozey little brat is what he is."

Slumping as he spoke. Face growing blacker and blacker, like storm clouds drifting across the sun. Depape, his stirrup fixed, tossed Reynolds a nervous glance. Reynolds didn't answer it. What point? If Eldred went crazy now (and Reynolds had seen it happen before), there was no way they could get out of his killing-zone in time.

"Eldred, we got quite a spot more to do."

Reynolds spoke quietly, but it got through. Jonas straightened. He took off his hat, hung it on his saddle as if the horn were a coathook, and brushed absently through his hair with his fingers.

"Yar—quite a spot is right. Ride down there. Tell Quint to send for oxen to pull those last two full tankers out to Hanging Rock. He sh'd keep four men with him to hook em up and take em on to Latigo. The rest can go on ahead."

Reynolds now judged it safe to ask a question. "When do the rest of Latigo's men get there?"

"Men?" Jonas snorted. "Don't we wish, cully! The rest of Latigo's *boys'll* ride out to Hanging Rock by moonlight, pennons no doubt flying for all the coyotes and other assorted desert-dogs to see and be awed by. They'll be ready to do escort duty by ten tomorrow, I sh'd think ... al-though if they're the sort of lads I'm expecting, fuck-ups are apt to be the rule of the day. The good news is that we don't much need em, anyway. Things look well in hand. Now go down there, get them about their busi-ness, and then ride back to me, just as fast's you can."

Jonas turned and looked toward the lumpy swell of hills to the northwest.

"We have business of our own," he said. "Soonest begun, boys, soon-est done. I want to shake the dust of fucking Mejis off my hat and boots as soon as I can. I don't like the way it feels anymore. Not at all."

The woman, Theresa Maria Dolores O'Shyven, was forty years old, plump, pretty, mother of four, husband of Peter, a *vaquero* of laughing tempera-ment. She was also a seller of rugs and draperies in the Upper Market; many of the prettier and more delicate appointments at Seafront had passed through Theresa O'Shyven's hands, and her family was quite well-to-do. Although her husband was a range-

rider, the O'Shyven clan was what would have been called middle-class in another place and time. Her two oldest children were grown and gone, one right out o' Barony. The third eldest was sparking and hoping to marry his heart's delight at Year's End. Only the youngest suspected something was wrong with Ma, and this one had no idea how close Theresa was to complete obsessional madness.

*Soon, Rhea thought, watching Theresa avidly in the ball. She 'll start doing it soon, but first she's got to get rid of the brat.*

There was no school at Reaptide, and the stalls opened only for a few hours in the afternoon, so Theresa sent her youngest daughter off with a pie. A Reaptide gift to a neighbor, Rhea surmised, although she couldn't hear the soundless instructions the woman gave her daughter as she pulled a knitted cap down over the girl's ears. And 'twouldn't be a neighbor too close, either; she'd want time, would Theresa Maria Dolores O'Shyven, time to be a-choring. It was a good-sized house, and there were a lot of corners in it that needed cleaning.

Rhea chuckled; the chuckle turned into a hollow gust of coughing. In the corner, Musty looked at the old woman hauntedly. Although far from the emaciated skeleton that his mistress had become, Musty didn't look good at all.

The girl was shown out with the pie under her arm; she paused to give her mother a single troubled look, and then the door was shut in her face.

"Now!" Rhea croaked. "Them comers is waitin! Down on yer knees, woman, and get to business!"

First Theresa went to the window. When she was satisfied with what she saw—her daughter out the gate and down the High Street, likely—she turned back to her kitchen. She walked to the table and stood there, look-ing dreamy-eyed into space.

"No, none o' that, now!" Rhea cried impatiently. She no longer saw her own filthy hut, she no longer smelled either its rank aromas or her own. She had gone into the Wizard's Rainbow. She was with Theresa O'Shyven, whose cottage had the cleanest comers in all Mejis. Mayhap in all Mid-World.

"Hurry, woman!" Rhea half-screamed. "Get to yer housework!"

As if hearing, Theresa unbuttoned her housedress, stepped out of it, and laid it neatly over a chair. She pulled the hem of her clean, mended shift up over her knees, went to the comer, and got down on all fours. "That's it, my *corazon!*" Rhea cried, nearly choking on a phlegmy mixture of coughing and laughter. "Do yer chores, now, and do em wery pert!"

Theresa O'Shyven poked her head forward to the full length of her neck, opened her mouth, stuck out her tongue, and began to lick the corner. She lapped it as Musty lapped his milk. Rhea watched this, slapping her knee and whooping, her face growing redder and redder as she rocked from side to side. Oh, Theresa was her favorite, aye! No doubt! For hours now she would crawl about on her hands and knees with her ass in the air, licking into the corners, praying to some obscure god—not even the Man-Jesus God—for forgiveness of who knew what as she did this, her penance. Sometimes she got splinters in her tongue and had to pause to spit blood into the kitchen basin. Up until now some sixth sense had always gotten her to her feet and back into her dress before any of her family returned, but Rhea knew that sooner or later the woman's obsession would take her too far, and she would be surprised. Perhaps today would be the day—the little girl would come back early, perhaps for a coin to spend in town, and discover her mother down on her knees and licking the corners. Oh, what a spin and raree! How Rhea wanted to see it! How she longed to—

Suddenly Theresa O'Shyven was gone. The interior of her neat little cottage was gone. *Everything* was gone, lost in curtains of shifting pink light. For the first time in weeks, the wizard's glass had gone blank.

Rhea picked the ball up in her scrawny, long-nailed fingers and shook it. "What's wrong with you, plaguey thing? *What's wrong?*"

The ball was heavy, and Rhea's strength was fading. After two or three hard shakes, it slipped in her grip. She cradled it against the deflated remains of her breasts, trembling.

"No, no, lovey," she crooned. "Come back when ye're ready, aye, Rhea lost her temper a bit but she's got it back now, she never meant to shake ye and she'd never *ever* drop ye, so ye just—"

She broke off and cocked her head, listening. Horses approaching. No, not approaching; *here*. Three riders, by the sound. They had crept up on her while she was distracted.

The boys? Those plaguey boys?

Rhea held the ball against her bosom, eyes wide, lips wet. Her hands were now so thin that the ball's pink glow shone through them, faintly illuminating the dark spokes that were her bones.

"Rhea! Rhea of the Coos!"



No, not the boys.

"Come out here, and bring what you were given!"

Worse.

"Farson wants his property! We've come to take it!"

Not the boys but the Big Coffin Hunters.

"Never, ye dirty old white-haired prick," she whispered. "Ye'll never take it." Her eyes moved from side to side in small, shooting peeks. Scraggle-headed and tremble-mouthed, she looked like a diseased coyote driven into its final arroyo. She looked down at the ball and a whining noise began to escape her. Now even the pink glow was gone. The sphere was as dark as a corpse's eyeball.

10

A shriek came from the hut.

Depape turned to Jonas with wide eyes, his skin prickling. The thing which had uttered that cry hardly sounded human.

"Rhea!" Jonas called again. "Bring it out here now, woman, and hand it over! I've no time to play games with you!"

The door of the hut swung open. Depape and Reynolds drew their guns as the old crone stepped out, blinking against the sunlight like some-thing that's spent its whole life in a cave. She was holding John Farson's favorite toy high over her head. There were plenty of rocks in the dooryard she could throw it against, and even if her aim was bad and she missed them all, it might smash anyway.

This could be bad, and Jonas knew it—there were some people you just couldn't threaten. He had focused so much of his attention on the brats (who, ironically, had been taken as easy as milk) that it had never occurred to him to worry much about this part of it. And Kimba Rimer, the man who had suggested Rhea as the perfect custodian for Maerlyn's Rainbow, was dead. Couldn't lay it at Rimer's doorstep if things went wrong up here, could he?

Then, just to make things a little worse when he'd have thought they'd gone as far west as they could without dropping off the cold end of the earth, he heard the cocking sound of Depape drawing the hammer of his gun.

"Put that away, you idiot!" he snarled.

"But look at her!" Depape almost moaned. "*Look* at her, Eldred!"

He *was*. The thing inside the black dress appeared to be wearing the corpse of a putrefying snake around its throat for a necklace. She was so scrawny that she resembled nothing so much as a walking skeleton. Her peeling skull was only tufted with hair; the rest had fallen out. Sores clustered on her cheeks and brow, and there was a mark like a spider-bite on the left side of her mouth. Jonas thought that last might be a scurvy-bloom, but he didn't really care one way or another. What he cared about was the ball upraised in the dying woman's long and shivering claws.

11

The sunlight so dazzled Rhea's eyes that she didn't see the gun pointed at her, and when her vision cleared, Depape had put it away again. She looked at the men lined up across from her—the bespectacled redhead, the one in the cloak, and Old White-Hair Jonas—and uttered a dusty croak of laughter. Had she been afraid of them, these mighty Coffin Hunters? She supposed she had, but for gods' sake, why? They were men, that was all, just more men, and she had been beating such all her life. Oh, they thought they ruled the roost, all right—nobody in Mid-World accused anyone of forgetting the face of his *mother*—but they were poor things, at bottom, moved to tears by a sad song, utterly undone by the sight of a bare breast, and all the more capable of being manipulated simply because they were so sure they were strong and tough and wise.

The glass was dark, and as much as she hated that darkness, it had cleared her mind.

"Jonas!" she cried. "Eldred Jonas!"

"I'm here, old mother," he said. "Long days and pleasant nights."

"Never mind yer sops, time's too short for em." She came four steps farther and stopped with the ball still held over her head. Near her, a gray chunk of stone jutted from the weedy ground. She looked at it, then back at Jonas. The implication was unspoken but unmistakable.

"What do you want?" Jonas asked.

"The ball's gone dark," she said, answering from the side. "All the time I had it in my keeping, it was lively—aye, even when it showed nothing I could make out, it was passing lively, bright and pink—but it fell dark almost at the sound of yer

voice. It doesn't want to go with ye."

"Nevertheless, I'm under orders to take it." Jonas's voice became soft and conciliating. It wasn't the tone he used when he was in bed with Coral, but it was close. "Think a minute, and you'll see my situation. Far-son wants it, and who am I to stand against the wants of a man who'll be the most powerful in Mid-World when Demon Moon rises next year? If I come back without it and say Rhea of the Coos refused me it, I'll be killed."

"If ye come back and tell him I broke it in yer ugly old face, ye'll be killed, too," Rhea said. She was close enough for Jonas to see how far her sickness had eaten into her. Above the few remaining tufts of her hair, the wretched ball was trembling back and forth. She wouldn't be able to hold it much longer. A minute at most. Jonas felt a dew of sweat spring out on his forehead.

"Aye, mother. But d'you know, given a choice of deaths, I'd choose to take the cause of my problem with me. That's you, darling."

She croaked again—that dusty replica of laughter—and nodded appreciatively. "

"Twon't do Farson any good without me in any case," she said. "It's found its mistress, I wot—that's why it went dark at the sound of yer voice."

Jonas wondered how many others had believed the ball was just for them. He wanted to wipe the sweat from his brow before it ran in his eyes, but kept his hands in front of him, folded neatly on the horn of his saddle.

He didn't dare look at either Reynolds or Depape. and could only hope they would leave the play to him. She was balanced on both a physical and mental knife-edge; the smallest movement would send her tumbling off in one direction or the other.

"Found the one it wants, has it?" He thought he saw a way out of this. If he was lucky. And it might be lucky for her, as well. "What should we do about that?"

"Take me with ye." Her face twisted into an expression of gruesome greed; she looked like a corpse that is trying to sneeze. *She doesn't realize she's dying*, Jonas thought. *Thank the gods for that.* "Take the ball, but take me, as well. I'll go with ye to Farson. I'll become his soothsayer, and nothing will stand before us, not with me to read the ball for him. Take me with ye!"

"All right," Jonas said. It was what he had hoped for. "Although what Farson decides is none o' mine. You know that?"

"Aye."

"Good. Now give me the ball. I'll give it back into your keeping, if you like, but I

need to make sure it's whole."

She slowly lowered it. Jonas didn't think it was entirely safe even cradled in her arms, but he breathed a little easier when it was, all the same. She shuffled toward him, and he had to control an urge to gig his horse back from her.

He bent over in the saddle, holding his hands out for the glass. She looked up at him, her old eyes still shrewd behind their crusted lids. One of them actually drew down in a conspirator's wink. "I know yer mind, Jonas. Ye think, 'I'll take the ball, then draw my gun and kill her, what harm?' Isn't that true? Yet there *would* be harm, and all to you and yours. Kill me and the ball will never shine for Farson again. For someone, aye, someday, mayhap; but not for him . . . and will he let ye live if ye bring his toy back and he discovers it's broken?"

Jonas had already considered this. "We have a bargain, old mother. You go west with the glass ... unless you die beside the trail some night. You'll pardon me for saying so, but you don't look well."

She cackled. "I'm better'n I look, oh yar! Years left 'fore this clock o' mine runs down!"

*I think you may be wrong about that, old mother,* Jonas thought. But he kept his peace and only held his hands out for the ball.

For a moment longer she held it. Their arrangement was made and agreed to on both sides, but in the end she could barely bring herself to ungrasp the ball. Greed shone in her eyes like moonlight through fog.

He held his hands out patiently, saying nothing, waiting for her mind to accept reality—if she let go, there was some chance. If she held on, very likely everyone in this stony, weedy yard would end up riding the handsome before long.

With a sigh of regret, she finally put the ball in his hands. At the in-stant it passed from her to him, an ember of pink light pulsed deep in the depths of the glass. A throb of pain drove into Jonas's head . . . and a shiver of lust coiled in his balls.

As from a great distance, he heard Depape and Reynolds cocking their pistols.

"Put those away," Jonas said. "But—" Reynolds looked confused.

"They thought'ee was going to double-cross Rhea," the old woman said, cackling.

"Good thing ye're in charge rather than them, Jonas ... mayhap you know summat they don't."

He knew something, all right—how dangerous the smooth, glassy thing in his hands was. It could take him in a blink, if it wanted. And in a month, he would be

like the witch: scrawny, raddled with sores, and too obsessed to know or care. "Put them away!" he shouted.

Reynolds and Depape exchanged a glance, then reholstered their guns. "There was a bag for this thing," Jonas said. "A drawstring bag laid inside the box. Get it."

"Aye," Rhea said, grinning unpleasantly at him. "But it won't keep the ball from takin ye if it wants to. Ye needn't think it will." She surveyed the other two, and her eye fixed on Reynolds. "There's a cart in my shed, and a pair of good gray goats to pull it." She spoke to Reynolds, but her eyes kept turning back to the ball, Jonas noticed . . . and now *his* damned eyes wanted to go there, too.

"You don't give me orders," Reynolds said.

"No, but I do," Jonas said. His eyes dropped to the ball, both wanting and fearing to see that pink spark of life deep inside. Nothing. Cold and dark. He dragged his gaze back up to Reynolds again. "Get the cart."

## 12

Reynolds heard the buzzing of flies even before he slipped through the shed's sagging door, and knew at once that Rhea's goats had finished their days of pulling. They lay bloated and dead in their pen, legs sticking up and the sockets of their eyes squirming with maggots. It was impossible to know when Rhea had last fed and watered them, but Reynolds guessed at least a week, from the smell. *Too busy watching what goes on in that glass ball to bother, he thought. And what's she wearing that dead snake around her neck for?*

"I don't want to know," he muttered from behind his pulled-up neck-erchief. The only thing he *did* want right now was to get the hell out of here.

He spied the cart, which was painted black and overlaid with cabalistic designs in gold. It looked like a medicine-show wagon to Reynolds; it also looked a bit like a hearse. He seized it by the handles and dragged it out of the shed as fast as he could. Depape could do the rest, by gods. Hitch his horse to the cart and haul the old woman's stinking freight to ... where? Who knew? Eldred, maybe.

Rhea came tottering out of her hut with the drawstring bag they'd brought the ball in, but she stopped, head cocked, listening, when Reynolds asked his question. Jonas thought it over, then said: "Seafront to begin, I guess. Yar, that'll do for her, and this glass bauble as well, I reckon, until the party's over tomorrow."

"Aye, Seafront, I've never been there," Rhea said, moving forward again. When she reached Jonas's horse (which tried to shy away from her), she opened the bag. After a moment's further consideration, Jonas dropped the ball in. It bulged round at the bottom, making a shape like a teardrop.

Rhea wore a sly smile. "Mayhap we'll meet Thorin. If so, I might have something to show him in the Good Man's toy that'd interest him ever so much."

"If you meet him," Jonas said, getting down to help hitch Depape's horse to the black cart, "it'll be in a place where no magic is needed to see far."

She looked at him, frowning, and then the sly smile slowly resur-faced. "Why, I b'lieve our Mayor's met wiv a accident!"

"Could be," Jonas agreed.

She giggled, and soon the giggle turned into a full-throated cackle. She was still cackling as they drew out of the yard, cackling and sitting in the little black cart with its cabalistic decorations like the Queen of Black Places on her throne.

## **CHAPTER VIII**

### **the ashes**

everything is in flux. It was the sight of Miguel, the old *mozo*, that started Susan down its greased slope. He was in the middle of Seafront's courtyard, clutching his broom of twigs against his chest and looking at the riders who passed to and fro with an expression of perplexed misery. His *sombrero* was twisted around on his back, and Susan observed with something like horror that Miguel—usually brushed and clean and neat as a pin—was wearing his *serape* inside out. There were tears on his cheeks, and as he turned this way and that, following the passing riders, trying to hile those he recognized, she thought of a child she had once seen toddle out in front of an oncoming stage. The child had been pulled back in time by his father; who would pull Miguel back?

She started for him, and a *vaquero* aboard a wild-eyed spotted roan galloped so close by her that one stirrup ticked off her hip and the horse's tail flicked her forearm. She voiced a strange-sounding little chuckle. She had been worried about Miguel and had almost been run down herself! Funny!

She looked both ways this time, started forward, then drew back again as a loaded wagon came careering around the corner, tottering on two wheels at first. What it was loaded with she couldn't see—the goods in the wagonbed were covered with a tarp -but she saw Miguel move toward it, still clutching his broom. Susan thought of the child in front of the stage again and shrieked an inarticulate cry of alarm. Miguel cringed back at the last moment and the cart flew by him, bounded and swayed across the courtyard, and disappeared out through the arch.

Miguel dropped his broom, clapped both hands to his cheeks, fell to his knees, and began to pray in a loud, lamenting voice. Susan watched him for a moment, her mouth working, and then sprinted for the stables, no longer taking care to keep against the side of the building. She had caught the disease that would grip almost all of Hambry by noon, and al-though she managed to do a fairly apt job of saddling Pylon (on any other day there would have been three stable-boys vying for the chance to help the pretty sai), any ability to think had left her by the time she heel-kicked the startled horse into a run outside the stable door.

When she rode past Miguel, still on his knees and praying to the bright sky with his hands upraised, she saw him no more than any other rider had before her.

She rode straight down the High Street, thumping her spurless heels at Pylon's sides until the big horse was fairly flying. Thoughts, questions, possible plans of action ... none of those had a place in her head as she rode. She was but vaguely aware of the people milling in the street, allowing Pylon to weave his own path through them. The only thing she was aware of was his name—*Roland, Roland, Roland!*—ringing in her head like a scream. Everything had gone upside down. The brave little *ka-tet* they had made that night at the graveyard was broken, three of its members jailed and with not long to live (if they even *were* still alive), the last member lost and confused, as crazy with terror as a bird in a barn. If her panic had held, things might have turned out in a much different fashion. But as she rode through the center of town and out the other side, her way took her toward the house she had shared with her father and her aunt. That lady had been watching for the very rider who now approached.

As Susan neared, the door flew open and Cordelia, dressed in black from throat to toe, rushed down the front walk to the street, shrieking with either horror or laughter. Perhaps both. The sight of her cut through the foreground haze of panic in Susan's mind . . . but not because she recognized her aunt.

"*Rhea!*" she cried, and drew back on the reins so violently that the horse skidded, reared, and almost tilted them over backward. That would likely have crushed the life out of his mistress, but Pylon managed to keep at least his back feet, pawing at the sky with his front ones and whinnying loudly. Susan slung an arm around his neck and hung on for dear life.

Cordelia Delgado, wearing her best black dress and a lace mantilla over her hair, stood in front of the horse as if in her own parlor, taking no notice of the hooves cutting the air less than two feet in front of her nose. In one gloved hand she held a wooden box.

Susan belatedly realized that this wasn't Rhea, but the mistake really wasn't that odd. Aunt Cord wasn't as thin as Rhea (not yet, anyway), and more neatly dressed (except for her dirty gloves—why her aunt was wearing gloves in the first place Susan didn't know, let alone why they looked so smudged), but the mad look in her eyes was horribly similar.

"Good day t'ye, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty!" Aunt Cord greeted her in a cracked, vivacious voice that made Susan's heart tremble. Aunt Cord curtsied one-handed, holding the little box curled against her chest with the other. "Where



go ye on this fine autumn day? Where go ye so speedy? To no lover's arms, that seems sure, for one's dead and the other ta'en!"

Cordelia laughed again, thin lips drawing back from big white teeth. Horse teeth, almost. Her eyes glared in the sunlight.

*Her mind's broken, Susan thought. Poor thing. Poor old thing.*

"Did thee put Dearborn up to it?" Aunt Cord asked. She crept to Py-lon's side and looked up at Susan with luminous, liquid eyes. "Thee did, didn't thee? Aye! Perhaps thee even gave him the knife he used, after runnin yer lips o'er it for good luck. Ye're in it together—why not admit it? At least admit thee's lain with that boy, for I know it's true. I saw the way he looked at ye the day ye were sitting in the window, and the way ye looked back at him!"

Susan said, "If ye'll have truth, I'll give it to ye. We're lovers. And we'll be man and wife ere Year's End."

Cordelia raised one dirty glove to the blue sky and waved it as if say-ing hello to the gods. She screamed with mingled triumph and laughter as she waved. "And t'be *wed*, she thinks! Ooooo! Ye'd no doubt drink the blood of your victims on the marriage altar, too, would ye not? Oh, wicked! It makes me weep!" But instead of weeping she laughed again, a howl of mirth into the blind blue face of the sky.

"We planned no murders," Susan said, drawing—if only in her own mind—a line of difference between the killings at Mayor's House and the trap they had hoped to spring on Parson's soldiers. "And he *did* no mur-ders. No, this is the business of your friend Jonas, I wot. His plan, his filthy work."

Cordelia plunged her hand into the box she held, and Susan under-stood at once why the gloves she wore were dirty: she had been grubbing in the stove.

*"I curse thee with the ashes!"* Cordelia cried, flinging a black and gritty cloud of them at Susan's leg and the hand which held Pylon's reins. *"I curse thee to darkness, both of thee! Be ye happy together, ye faith-less! Ye murderers! Ye cozeners! Ye liars! Ye fornicators! Ye lost and renounced!"*

With each cry, Cordelia Delgado threw another handful of ashes. And with each cry, Susan's mind grew clearer, colder. She held fast and al-lowed her aunt to pelt her; in fact, when Pylon, feeling the gritty rain against his side, attempted to pull away, Susan giggled him set. There were spectators now, avidly watching this old ritual of renunciation (Sheemie was among them, eyes wide and mouth quivering), but Susan barely noticed. Her mind was her own again, she had an idea of what to

do, and for that alone she supposed she owed her aunt some sort of thanks.

"I forgive ye, Aunt," she said.

The box of stove-ashes, now almost empty, tumbled from Cordelia's hands as if Susan had slapped her. "What?" she whispered. "What does thee say?"

"For what ye did to yer brother and my father," Susan said. "For what ye were a part of."

She rubbed a hand on her leg and bent with the hand held out before her. Before her aunt could pull away, Susan had wiped ashes down one of her cheeks. The smudge stood out there like a wide, dark scar. "But wear that, all the same," she said. "Wash it off if ye like, but I think ye'll wear it in yer heart yet awhile." She paused. "I think ye already do. Goodbye."

"Where does thee think thee's going?" Aunt Cord was pawing at the soot-mark on her face with one gloved hand, and when she lunged for-ward in an attempt to grasp Pylon's reins, she stumbled over the box and almost fell. It was Susan, still bent over to her aunt's side, who grasped her shoulder and held her up. Cordelia pulled back as if from the touch of an adder. "Not to him! Ye'll not go to him now, ye mad goose!"

Susan turned her horse away. "None of yer business. Aunt. This is the end between us. But mark what I say: we'll be married by Year's End. Our firstborn is already conceived."

"Thee'll be married tomorrow night if thee goes nigh him' Joined in smoke, wedded in fire, bedded in the ashes! *Bedded in the ashes*, do ye hear me?"

The madwoman advanced on her, railing, but Susan had no more time to listen.

The day was fleeting. There would be time to do the things that needed doing, but only if she moved at speed.

"Goodbye," she said again, and then galloped away. Her aunt's last words followed her: *In the ashes, do ye hear me?*

### 3

On her way out of town along the Great Road, Susan saw riders coming toward her, and got off the highway. This would not, she felt, be a good time to meet pilgrims. There was an old granary nearby; she rode Pylon behind it, stroked his neck, murmured for him to be quiet.

It took the riders longer to reach her position than she would have expected, and when they finally got there, she saw why. Rhea was with them, sitting in a black cart covered with magical symbols. The witch had been scary when Susan had seen her on the night of the Kissing Moon, but still recognizably human; what the girl saw passing before her now, rocking from side to side in the black cart and clutching a bag in her lap, was an unsexed, sore-raddled creature that looked more like a troll than a human being. With her were the Big Coffin Hunters.

"To Seafront!" the thing in the cart screamed. "Hie you on, and at full speed! I'll sleep in Thorin's bed tonight or know the reason why! Sleep in it and piss in it, if I take a notion! Hie you on, I say!"

Depape—it was to his horse that the cart had been harnessed—turned around and looked at her with distaste and fear. "Still your mouth."

Her answer was a fresh burst of laughter. She rocked from side to side, holding a bag on her lap with one hand and pointing at Depape with the twisted, long-nailed index finger of the other. Looking at her made Susan feel weak with terror, and she felt the panic around her again, like some dark fluid that would happily drown her brain if given half a chance.

She worked against the feeling as best she could, holding onto her mind, refusing to let it turn into what it had been before and would be again if she let it—a brainless bird trapped in a barn, bashing into the walls and ignoring the open window through which it had entered.

Even when the cart was gone below the next hill and there was nothing left of them but dust hanging in the air, she could hear Rhea's wild cackling.

#### 4

She reached the hut in the Bad Grass at one o' the clock. For a moment she just sat astride Pylon, looking at it. Had she and Roland been here hardly twenty-four hours ago? Making love and making plans? It was hard to believe, but when she dismounted and went in, the wicker basket in which she had brought them a cold meal confirmed it. It still sat upon the rickety table.

Looking at the hamper, she realized she hadn't eaten since the previous evening—a miserable supper with Hart Thorin that she'd only picked at, too aware of his eyes on her body. Well, they'd done their last crawl, hadn't they? And she'd

never have to walk down another Seafront hall-way wondering what door he was going to come bursting out of like Jack out of his box, all grabbing hands and stiff, randy prick.

*Ashes, she thought. Ashes and ashes. But not us, Roland. I swear, my darling, not us.*

She was frightened and tense, trying to put everything she now must do in order—a process to be followed just as there was a process to be followed when saddling a horse—but she was also sixteen and healthy. One look at the hamper and she was ravenous.

She opened it, saw there were ants on the two remaining cold beef sandwiches, brushed them off, and gobbled the sandwiches down. The bread had gotten rather stiff, but she hardly noticed. There was a half jar of sweet cider and part of a cake, as well.

When she had finished everything, she went to the north corner of the hut and moved the hides someone had begun to cure and then lost interest in. There was a hollow beneath. Within it, wrapped in soft leather, were Roland's guns.

*If things go badly, thee must come here and take them west to Gilead. Find my father.*

With faint but genuine curiosity, Susan wondered if Roland had really expected she would ride blithely off to Gilead with his unborn child in her belly while he and his friends were roasted, screaming and red-handed, on the Reap-Night bonfire.

She pulled one of the guns out of its holster. It took her a moment or two to see how to get the revolver open, but then the cylinder rolled out and she saw that each chamber was loaded. She snapped it back into place and checked the other one.

She concealed them in the blanket-roll behind her saddle, just as Roland had, then mounted up and headed east again. But not toward town. Not yet. She had one more stop to make first.

## 5

At around two o' the clock, word that Fran Lengyll would be speaking at the Town Gathering Hall began to sweep through the town of Mejis. No one could have said

where this news (it was too firm and specific to be a rumor) began, and no one much cared; they simply passed it on.

By three o' the clock, the Gathering Hall was full, and two hundred or more stood outside, listening as Lengyll's brief address was relayed back to them in whispers. Coral Thorin, who had begun passing the news of Lengyll's impending appearance at the Travellers' Rest, was not there. She knew what Lengyll was going to say; had, in fact, supported Jonas's argument that it should be as simple and direct as possible. There was no need for rabble-rousing; the townsfolk would be a mob by sundown of

Reaping Day, a mob always picked its own leaders, and it always picked the right ones.

Lengyll spoke with his hat held in one hand and a silver reap-charm hanging from the front of his vest. He was brief, he was rough, and he was convincing. Most folks in the crowd had known him all their lives, and didn't doubt a word he said. Hart Thorin and Kimba Rimer had been murdered by Dearborn, Heath, and Stockworth, Lengyll told the crowd of men in denim and women in faded gingham. The crime had come home to them because of a certain item—a bird's skull—left in Mayor Thorin's lap.

Murmurs greeted this. Many of Lengyll's listeners had seen the skull, either mounted on the horn of Cuthbert's saddle or worn jauntily around his neck. They had laughed at his prankishness. Now they thought of how he had laughed back at them, and realized he must have been laughing at a different joke all along. Their faces darkened.

The weapon used to slit the Chancellor's throat, Lengyll continued, had belonged to Dearborn. The three young men had been taken that morning as they prepared to flee Mejis. Their motivations were not entirely clear, but they were likely after horses. If so, they would be for John Farson, who was known to pay well for good nags, and in cash. They were, in other words, traitors to their own lands and to the cause of the Affiliation.

Lengyll had planted Brian Hockey's son Rufus three rows back. Now, exactly on time, Rufus Hookey shouted out: "Has they confessed?"

"Aye," Lengyll said. "Confessed both murders, and spoke it most proud, so they did."

A louder murmur at this, almost a rumble. It ran backward like a wave to the

outside, where it went from mouth to mouth: most proud, most proud, they had murdered in the dark of night and spoke it most proud.

Mouths were tucked down. Fists clenched.

"Dearborn said that Jonas and his friends had caught on to what they were doing, and took the word to Rimer. They killed Chancellor Rimer to shut him up while they finished their chores, and Thorin in case Rimer had passed word on."

This made little sense, Latigo had argued. Jonas had smiled and nod-ded. *No*, he had said, *not a mite of sense, but it doesn't matter.*

Lengyll was prepared to answer questions, but none were asked. There was only the murmur, the dark looks, the muted click and clink of reap-charms as people shifted on their feet.

The boys were in jail. Lengyll made no statement concerning what would happen to them next, and once again he was not asked. He said that some of the activities scheduled for the next day—the games, the rides, the turkey-run, the pumpkin-carving contest, the pig-scramble, the rid-dling competition, and the dance—had been cancelled out of respect for the tragedy. The things that really mattered would go on, of course, as they always had and must: the cattle and livestock judging, the horse-pull, the sheep-shearing, the stockline meetings, and the auctions: horse, pig, cow, sheep. And the bonfire at moonrise. The bonfire and the burning of the guys. *Charyou tree* was the end of Reaping Fair-Day, and had been since time out of mind. Nothing would stop it save the end of the world.

"The bonfire will bum and the stuffy-guys will bum on it," Eldred Jonas had told Lengyll. "That's all you're to say. It's all you *need* to say."

And he'd been right, Lengyll saw. It was on every face. Not just the determination to do right, but a kind of dirty eagerness. There were old ways, old rites of which the red-handed stuffy-guys were one surviving remnant. There were *los ceremoniosos*: *Charyou tree*. It had been genera-tions since they had been practiced (except, every once and again, in se-cret places out in the hills), but sometimes when the world moved on, it came back to where it had been.

*Keep it brief*, Jonas had said, and it had been fine advice, fine advice indeed. He wasn't a man Lengyll would have wanted around in more peaceful times, but a useful one in times such as these.

"Gods give you peace," he said now, stepping back and folding his arms with his hands on his shoulders to show he had finished. "Gods give us all peace."

"Long days and peaceful nights," they returned in a low, automatic chorus. And then they simply turned and left, to go wherever folks went on the afternoon before Reaping. For a good many of them, Lengyll knew, it would be the Travellers' Rest or the Bayview Hotel. He raised a hand and mopped his brow. He hated to be out in front of people, and never so much as today, but he thought it had gone well. Very well, indeed.

## 6

The crowd streamed away without speaking. Most, as Lengyll had fore-seen, headed for the saloons. Their way took them past the jail, but few looked at it... and those few who did, did so in tiny, furtive glances. The porch was empty (save for a plump red-handed stuffy sprawled in Sheriff Avery's rocker), and the door stood ajar, as it usually did on warm and sunny afternoons. The boys were inside, no doubt about that, but there was no sign that they were being guarded with any particular zeal.

If the men passing on their way downhill to the Rest and the Bayview had banded together into one group, they could have taken Roland and his friends with no trouble whatsoever. Instead, they went by with their heads down, walking stolidly and with no conversation to where the drinks were waiting. Today was not the day. Nor tonight.

Tomorrow, however—

## 7

Not too far from the Bar K, Susan saw something on the Barony's long slope of grazing-land that made her rein up and simply sit in the saddle with her mouth open. Below her and much farther east of her position, at least three miles away, a band of a dozen cowboys had rounded up the biggest herd of Drop-runners she had ever seen: perhaps four hundred head in all. They ran lazily, going where the *vaqs* pointed them with no trouble.

*Probably think they're going in for the winter,* Susan thought. But they weren't headed in toward the ranches running along the crest of the Drop; the herd, so large it flowed on the grass like a cloud-shadow, was headed west, toward

Hanging Rock.

Susan had believed everything Roland said, but this made it true in a personal way, one she could relate directly to her dead father. Horses, of courses.

"You bastards," she murmured. "You horse-thieving *bastards*." She turned Pylon and rode for the burned-out ranch. To her right, her shadow was growing long. Overhead, the Demon Moon glimmered ghostly in the daylight sky.

## 8

She had worried that Jonas might have left men at the Bar K—although why he would've she didn't really know, and the fear turned out to be groundless in any case. The ranch was as empty as it had been for the five or six years between the fire that had put paid to it and the arrival of the boys from In-World. She could see signs of that morning's confrontation, however, and when she went into the bunkhouse where the three of them had slept, she at once saw the gaping hole in the floorboards. Jonas had neglected to close it up again after taking Alain's and Cuthbert's guns.

She went down the aisle between the bunks, dropped to one knee, and looked into the hole. Nothing. Yet she doubted if what she had come for had been there in the first place—the hole wasn't big enough.

She paused, looking at the three cots. Which was Roland's? She supposed she could find out—her nose would tell her, she knew the smell of his hair and skin very well—but she thought she would do better to put such soft impulses behind her. What she needed now was to be hard and quick—to move without pausing or looking back.

*Ashes*, Aunt Cord whispered in her head, almost too faintly to hear. Susan shook her head impatiently, as if to clear that voice away, and walked out back.

There was nothing behind the bunkhouse, nothing behind the privy or to either side of it. She went around to the back of the old cook-shack next, and there she found what she'd come looking for, placed casually and with no attempt at concealment: the two small barrels she had last seen slung over Caprichoso's back. The thought of the mule summoned the thought of Sheemie, looking down at her from his man's height and with his hopeful boy's face. *I'd like to take a fin de ano kiss from ye, so I would.*



Sheemie, whose life had been saved by "Mr. Arthur Heath." Sheemie, who had risked the wrath of the witch by giving Cuthbert the note meant for her aunt. Sheemie, who had brought these barrels up here. They had been smeared with soot to partially camouflage them, and Susan got some on her hands and the sleeves of her shirt as she took off the tops— more ashes. But the firecrackers were still inside: the round, fist-sized big-bangers and the smaller ladyfingers.

She took plenty of both, stuffing her pockets until they bulged and carrying more in her arms. She stowed them in her saddlebags, then looked up at the sky. Three-thirty. She wanted to get back to Hambry no earlier than twilight, and that meant at least an hour to wait. There was a little time to be soft, after all.

Susan went back into the bunkhouse and found the bed which had been Roland's easily enough. She knelt beside it like a child saying bed-time prayers, put her face against his pillow, and inhaled deeply.

"Roland," she said, her voice muffled. "How I love thee. How I love thee, dear." She lay on his bed and looked toward the window, watching the light drain away. Once she raised her hands in front of her eyes, examining the barrel-soot on her fingers. She thought of going to the pump in front of the cookhouse and washing, but decided not to. Let it stay. They were *ka-tet*, one from many—strong in purpose and strong in love.

Let the ashes stay, and do their worst.

## 9

*My Susie has'er faults, but she's always on time.* Pat Delgado used to say. *Fearful punctual, that girl.*

It was true on the night before Reap. She skirted her own house and rode up to the Travellers' Rest not ten minutes after the sun had finally gone behind the hills, filling the High Street with thick mauve shadows.

The street was eerily deserted, considering it was the night before Reap; the band which had played in Green Heart every night for the last week was silent; there were periodic rattles of firecrackers, but no yelling, laughing children; only a few of the many colored lamps had been lit.

Stuffy-guys seemed to peer from every shadow-thickened porch. Susan shivered at the sight of their blank white-cross eyes.

Doings at the Rest were similarly odd. The hitching-rails were crowded (even more horses had been tied at the rails of the mercantile across the street) and light shone from every window—so many windows and so many lights that the inn looked like a vast ship on a darkened sea—but there was none of the usual riot and jubilation, all set to the jagtime tunes pouring out of Sheb's piano.

She found she could imagine the customers inside all too well— a hundred men, maybe more—simply standing around and drinking. Not talking, not laughing, not chucking the dice down Satan's Alley and cheering or groaning at the result. No bottoms stroked or pinched; no Reap-kisses stolen; no arguments started out of loose mouths and finished with hard fists. Just men drinking, not three hundred yards from where her love and his friends were locked up. The men who were here wouldn't do anything tonight but drink, though. And if she was lucky . . . brave and lucky...

As she drew Pylon up in front of the saloon with a murmured word, a shape rose out of the shadows. She tensed, and then the first orangey light of the rising moon caught Sheemie's face. She relaxed again—even laughed a little, mostly at herself. He was a part of their *ka-tet*; she knew he was. Was it surprising that he should know, as well?

"Susan," he murmured, taking off his *sombrero* and holding it against his chest. "I been waiting for'ee."

"Why?" she asked.

" 'Cause I knew ye'd come." He looked back over his shoulder at the Rest, a black bulk spraying crazy light toward every point of the compass. "We're going to let Arthur and them free, ain't we?"

"I hope so," she said.

"We have to. The folks in there, they don't talk, but they don't *have* to talk. I knows, Susan, daughter of Pat. *I knows.*"

She supposed he did. "Is Coral inside?"

Sheemie shook his head. "Gone up to Mayor's House. She told Stanley she was going to help lay out the bodies for the funeral day after to-morrow, but I don't think she'll be here for the funeral. I think the Big Coffin Hunters is going and she'll go with 'em." He raised a hand and swiped at his leaking eyes. "Your mule, Sheemie—" "All saddled, and I got the long halter." She looked at him, open-mouthed. "How did ye know—" "Same way I knew ye'd be coming, Susan-sai. I

just knew." He shrugged, then pointed vaguely. "Capi's around the back. I tied him to the cook's pump."

"That's good." She fumbled in the saddlebag where she had put the smaller firecrackers. "Here. Take some of these. Do'ee have a sulfur or two?"

"Aye." He asked no questions, simply stuffed the firecrackers into his front pocket. She, however, who had never been through the bat-wing doors of the Travellers' Rest in her whole life, had another question for him.

"What do they do with their coats and hats and *scrapes* when they come in, Sheemie? They must take em off; drinking's warm work."

"Oh, aye. They puts em on a long table just inside the door. Some fights about whose is whose when they're ready to go home."

She nodded, thinking hard and fast. He stood before her, still holding his *sombrero* against his chest, letting her do what he could not ... at least not in the conventionally understood way. At last she raised her head again.

"Sheemie, if you help me, you're done in Hambry ... done in Mejis ... done in the Outer Arc. You go with us if we get away. You have to understand that. Do you?" She saw he did; his face fairly shone with the idea. "Aye, Susan! Go with you and Will Dearborn and Richard Stockworth and my best friend, Mr. Arthur Heath! Go to In-World! We'll see buildings and statues and women in gowns like fairy princesses and—"

"If we're caught, we'll be killed."

He stopped smiling, but his eyes didn't waver. "Aye, killed we'll be if ta'en, most like."

"Will you still help me?"

"Capi's all saddled," he repeated. Susan reckoned that was answer enough. She took hold of the hand pressing the *sombrero* to Sheemie's chest (the hat's crown was pretty well crushed, and not for the first time). She bent, holding Sheemie's fingers with one hand and the horn of her saddle with the other, and kissed his cheek. He smiled up at her.

"We'll do our best, won't we?" she asked him.

"Aye, Susan daughter of Pat. We'll do our best for our friends. Our very best."

"Yes. Now listen, Sheemie. Very carefully."

She began to talk, and Sheemie listened.

Twenty minutes later, as the bloated orange moon struggled above the buildings of the town like a pregnant woman climbing a steep hill, a lone *vaquero* led a mule along Hill Street in the direction of the Sheriff's office. This end of Hill Street was a pit of shadows. There was a little light around Green Heart, but even the park (which would have been thronged, noisy, and brilliantly lit in any other year) was mostly empty. Nearly all the booths were closed, and of those few that remained open, only the fortune-teller was doing any business. Tonight all fortunes were bad, but still they came—don't they always?

The *vaquero* was wearing a heavy serape; if this particular cowboy had the breasts of a woman, they were concealed. The *vaq* wore a large, sweat-stained *sombrero*; if this cowboy had the face of a woman, it was likewise concealed. Low, from beneath that hat's broad brim, came a voice singing "Careless Love."

The mule's small saddle was buried under the large bundle which had been roped to it—cloth or clothes of some kind, it might have been, although the deepening shadows made it impossible to say for sure. Most amusing of all was what hung around the mule's neck like some peculiar reep-charm: two *sombreros* and a drover's hat strung on a length of rope.

As the *vaq* neared the Sheriff's office, the singing ceased. The place might have been deserted if not for the single dim light shining through one window. In the porch rocker was a comical stuffy-guy wearing one of Herk Avery's embroidered vests and a tin star. There were no guards; absolutely no sign that the three most hated men in Mejis were sequestered within. And now, very faintly, the *vaquero* could hear the strum of a guitar.

It was blotted out by a thin rattle of firecrackers. The *vaq* looked over one shoulder and saw a dim figure. It waved. The *vaquero* nodded, waved back, then tied the mule to the hitching-post—the same one where Roland and his friends had tied their horses when they had come to introduce themselves to the Sheriff, on a summer day so long ago.

The door opened—no one had bothered to lock it—while Dave Hollis was trying,

for about the two hundredth time, to play the bridge of "Cap-tain Mills, You Bastard." Across from him, Sheriff Avery sat rocked back in his desk chair with his hands laced together on his paunch. The room flickered with mild orange lamplight.

"You keep it up, Deputy Dave, and there won't have to be any execu-tion," Cuthbert Allgood said. He was standing at the door of one of the cells with his hands wrapped around the bars. "We'll kill ourselves. In self-defense."

"Shut up, maggot," Sheriff Avery said. He was half-dozing in the wake of a four-chop dinner, thinking of how he would tell his brother (and his brother's wife, who was killing pretty) in the next Barony about this heroic day. He would be modest, but he would still get it across to them that he'd played a central role; that if not for him, these three young *ladrones* might have—

"Just don't sing," Cuthbert said to Dave. "I'll confess to the murder of Arthur Eld himself if you just don't sing."

To Bert's left, Alain was sitting cross-legged on his bunk. Roland was lying on his with his hands behind his head, looking up at the ceiling. But at the moment the door's latch clicked, he swung to a sitting position. As if he'd only been waiting.

"That'll be Bridger," Deputy Dave said, gladly putting his guitar aside. He hated this duty and couldn't wait to be relieved. Heath's jokes were the worst. That he could continue to joke in the face of what was go-ing to happen to them tomorrow.

"I think it's likely one *of them*," Sheriff Avery said, meaning the Big Coffin Hunters.

In fact, it was neither. It was a cowboy all but buried in a *serape* that looked much too big for him (the ends actually dragged on the boards as he clumped in and shut the door behind him), and wearing a hat that came way down over his eyes. To Herk Avery, the fellow looked like some-body's idea of a cowboy stuffy.

"Say, stranger!" he said, beginning to smile ... for this was surely someone's joke, and Herk Avery could take a joke as well as any man. Especially after four chops and a mountain of mashed. "Howdy! What business do ye—"

The hand which hadn't closed the door had been under the *scrape*. When it came out, it was clumsily holding a gun all three of the prisoners recognized at once. Avery stared at it, his smile slowly fading. His hands unlaced themselves. His feet, which had been propped up on his desk, came down to the floor.

"Whoa, partner," he said slowly. "Let's talk about it."

"Get the keys off the wall and unlock the cells," the *vaq* said in a hoarse, artificially deep voice. Outside, unnoticed by all save Roland, more firecrackers rattled in a dry, popping string.

"I can't hardly do that," Avery said, easing open the bottom drawer of his desk with his foot. There were several guns, left over from that morning, inside. "Now, I don't know if that thing's loaded, but I don't hardly think a traildog like you—" The newcomer pointed the gun at the desk and pulled the trigger. The report was deafening in the little room, but Roland thought—hoped—that with the door shut, it would sound like just another firecracker. Bigger than some, smaller than others. *Good girl*, he thought. *Oh, good girl—but be careful. For gods' sake, Sue, be careful.*

All three of them standing in a line at the cell doors now, eyes wide and mouths tight.

The bullet struck the corner of the Sheriff's rolltop and tore off a huge splinter. Avery screamed, tilted back in his chair again, and went sprawl-ing. His foot remained hooked under the drawer-pull; the drawer shot out and overturned, spilling three ancient firearms across the board floor.

"Susan, look out!" Cuthbert shouted, and then: "No, Dave!"

At the end of his life, it was duty and not fear of the Big Coffin Hunters which propelled Dave Hollis, who had hoped to be Sheriff of Mejis himself when Avery retired (and, he sometimes told his wife, Judy, a better one than Fatso had ever dreamed of being). He forgot that he had serious questions about the way the boys had been taken as well as about what they might or might not have done. All he thought of then was that they were prisoners o' the Barony, and such would not be taken if he could help it.

He lunged for the cowboy in the too-big clothes, meaning to tear the gun out of his hands. And shoot him with it, if necessary.

## 12

Susan was staring at the yellow blaze of fresh wood on the corner of the Sheriff's desk, forgetting everything in her amazement—so much damage inflicted by the single twitch of a finger!—when Cuthbert's desperate shout awakened her to her position.

She shrank back against the wall, avoiding Dave's first swipe at the oversized *serape*, and, without thinking, pulled the trigger again. There was another loud explosion, and Dave Hollis—a young man only two years older than she herself—was flung backward with a smoking hole in his shirt between two points of the star he wore. His eyes were wide and unbelieving. His monocle lay by one outstretched hand on its length of black silk ribbon. One of his feet struck his guitar and knocked it to the floor with a thrum nearly as musical as the chords he had been trying to make.

"Dave," she whispered. "Oh Dave, I'm sorry, what did I do?"

Dave tried once to get up, then collapsed forward on his face. The hole going into the front of him was small, but the one she was looking at now, the one coming out the back, was huge and hideous, all black and red and charred edges of cloth ... as if she had run him through with a blazing hot poker instead of shooting him with a gun, which was supposed to be merciful and civilized and was clearly neither one.

"Dave," she whispered. "Dave, I..."

"*Susan look out!*" Roland shouted.

It was Avery. He scuttled forward on his hands and knees, seized her around the calves, and yanked her feet out from under her. She came down on her bottom with a tooth-rattling crash and was face to face with him—his frog-eyed, large-pored face, his garlic-smelling hole of a mouth.

"Gods, ye're a *girl*," he whispered, and reached for her. She pulled the trigger of Roland's gun again, setting the front of her *serape* on fire and blowing a hole in the ceiling. Plaster dust drifted down. Avery's ham sized hands settled around her throat, cutting off her wind. Somewhere far away, Roland shrieked her name.

She had one more chance.

Maybe.

*One's enough, Sue*, her father spoke inside of her head. *One's all ye need, my dear*. She cocked Roland's pistol with the side of her thumb, socked the muzzle deep into the flab hanging from the underside of Sheriff Herk Avery's head, and pulled the trigger.

The mess was considerable.

Avery's head dropped into her lap, as heavy and wet as a raw roast. Above it, she could feel growing heat. At the bottom edge of her vision was the yellow flicker of fire.

"On the desk!" Roland shouted, yanking the door of his cell so hard it rattled in its frame. "Susan, the water-pitcher! For your father's sake!"

She rolled Avery's head out of her lap, got to her feet, and staggered to the desk with the front of the *serape* burning. She could smell its charred stench and was grateful in some far corner of her mind that she'd had time, while waiting for dusk, to tie her hair behind her.

The pitcher was almost full, but not with water; she could smell the sweet-sour tang of *graf*. She doused herself with it, and there was a brisk hissing as the liquid hit the flames. She stripped the *serape* off (the over-sized *sombrero* came with it) and threw it on the floor. She looked at Dave again, a boy she had grown up with, one she might even have kissed behind the door of Hockey's, once upon an antique time.

"Susan!" It was Roland's voice, harsh and urgent. "The keys! Hurry!"

Susan grabbed the keyring from the nail on the wall. She went to Roland's cell first and thrust the ring blindly through the bars. The air was thick with smells of gunsmoke, burned wool, blood. Her stomach clenched helplessly at every breath. Roland picked the right key, reached back through the bars with it, and plunged it into the lockbox. A moment later he was out, and hugging her roughly as her tears broke. A moment after that, Cuthbert and Alain were out, as well.

"You're an angel!" Alain said, hugging her himself.

"Not I," she said, and began to cry harder. She thrust the gun at Roland. It felt filthy in her hand; she never wanted to touch one again. "Him and me played together when we were berries. He was one of the good ones—never a braid-puller or a bully—and he grew up a good one. Now I've ended him, and who'll tell his wife?"

Roland took her back into his arms and held her there for a moment. "You did what you had to. If not him, then us. Does thee not know it?"

She nodded against his chest. "Avery, him I don't mind so much, but Dave . . ."

"Come on," Roland said. "Someone might recognize the gunshots for what they were. Was it Sheemie throwing firecrackers?"



She nodded. "I've got clothes for you. Hats and *scrapes*."

Susan hurried back to the door, opened it, peeked out in either direction, then slipped into the growing dark.

Cuthbert took the charred *serape* and put it over Deputy Dave's face. "Tough luck, partner," he said. "You got caught in between, didn't you? I reckon you wasn't so bad."

Susan came back in, burdened with the stolen gear which had been tied to Capi's saddle. Sheemie was already off on his next errand without having to be told. If the inn-boy was a halfwit, she'd known a lot of folks in her time who were running on quarters and eighths.

"Where'd you get this stuff?" Alain asked.

"The Travellers' Rest. And I didn't. Sheemie did." She held the hats out. "Come on, hurry."

Cuthbert took the headgear and passed it out. Roland and Alain had already slipped into the *scrapes*; with the hats added and pulled well down over their faces, they could have been any *Drop-vaqs* in Barony.

"Where are we going?" Alain asked as they stepped out onto the porch. The street was still dark and deserted at this end; the gunshots had attracted no attention.

"Hockey's, to start with," Susan said. "That's where your horses are."

They went down the street together in a little group of four. Capi was gone; Sheemie had taken the mule along. Susan's heart was thudding rapidly and she could feel sweat standing out on her brow, but she still felt cold. Whether or no what she had done was murder, she had ended two lives this evening, and crossed a line that could never be recrossed in the other direction. She had done it for Roland, for her love, and simply knowing she could have done no different **now** offered some consolation.

*Be happy together, ye faithless, ye cozeners, ye murderers. I curse thee with the ashes.*

Susan seized Roland's hand, and when he squeezed, she squeezed back. And as she looked up at Demon Moon, its wicked face now draining from choleric red-orange to silver, she thought that when she had pulled the trigger on poor, earnest Dave Hollis, she had paid for her love with the dearest currency of all—had paid with her soul. If he left her now, her aunt's curse would be fulfilled, for only ashes would remain.

# CHAPTER IX

## REAPING

### 1

As they stepped into the stable, which was lit by one dim gas lamp, a shadow moved out of one of the stalls. Roland, who had belted on both guns, now drew them. Sheemie looked at him with an uncertain smile, holding a stirrup in one hand. Then the smile broadened, his eyes flashed with happiness, and he ran toward them.

Roland bolstered his guns and made ready to embrace the boy, but Sheemie ran past him and threw himself into Cuthbert's arms.

"Whoa, whoa," Cuthbert said, first staggering back comically and then lifting Sheemie off his feet. "You like to knock me over, boy!"

"She got ye out!" Sheemie cried. "Knew she would, so I did! Good old Susan!" Sheemie looked around at Susan, who stood beside Roland. She was still pale, but now seemed composed. Sheemie turned back to Cuthbert and planted a kiss directly in the center of Bert's forehead.

"Whoa!" Bert said again. "What's that for?"

" 'Cause I love you, good old Arthur Heath! You saved my life!"

"Well, maybe I did," Cuthbert said, laughing in an embarrassed way (his borrowed sombrero, too large to begin with, now sat comically askew on his head), "but if we don't get a move on, I won't have saved it for long."

"Horses are all saddled," Sheemie said. "Susan told me to do it and I did. I did it just right. I just have to put this stirrup on Mr. Richard Stock-worth's horse,

because the one on there's 'bout worn through."

"That's a job for later," Alain said, taking the stirrup. He put it aside, then turned to Roland. "Where do we go?"

Roland's first thought was that they should return to the Thorin mausoleum.

Sheemie reacted with instant horror. "The boneyard? And with De-mon Moon at the full?" He shook his head so violently that his *sombrero* came off and his hair flew from side to side. "They're dead in there, sai Dearborn, but if ye tease em during the time of the Demon, they's apt to get up and walk!"

"It's no good, anyway," Susan said. "The women of the town'll be lining the way from Seafront with flowers, and filling the mausoleum, too. Olive will be in charge, if she's able, but my aunt and Coral are apt to be in the company. Those aren't ladies we want to meet."

"All right," Roland said. "Let's mount up and ride. Think about it, Susan. You too, Sheemie. We want a place where we can hide up until dawn, at least, and it should be a place we can get to in less than an hour. Off the Great Road, and in any direction from Hambry but northwest."

"Why not northwest?" Alain asked.

"Because that's where we're going now. We've got a job to do ... and we're going to let them know we're doing it. Eldred Jonas most of all." He offered a thin blade of smile. "I want him to know the game is over. No more Castles. The *real* gunslingers are here. Let's see if he can deal with them."

## 2

An hour later, with the moon well above the trees, Roland's *ka-tet* arrived at the Citgo oilpatch. They rode out parallel to the Great Road for safety's sake, but, as it happened, the caution was wasted: they saw not one rider on the road, going in either direction. *It's as if Reaping's been cancelled this year*, Susan thought . . . then she thought of the red-handed stuffies, and shivered. They would have painted Roland's hands red tomorrow night, and still would, if they were caught. *Not just him, either. All of us.*

*Sheemie, too.*

They left the horses (and Caprichoso, who had trotted ill-temperedly but nimbly behind them on a tether) tied to some long-dead pumping equipment in the

southeastern corner of the patch, and then walked slowly toward the working derricks, which were clustered in the same area. They spoke in whispers when they spoke at all. Roland doubted if that was necessary, but whispers here seemed natural enough. To Roland, Citgo was far spookier than the graveyard, and while he doubted that the dead in that latter place awoke even when Old Demon was full, there were some *very* unquiet corpses here, squalling zombies that stood rusty-weird in the moonlight with their pistons going up and down like marching feet. Roland led them into the active part of the patch, nevertheless, past a sign which read *how's your hardhat?* and another reading *we produce oil, we refine safety*. They stopped at the foot of a derrick grinding so loudly that Roland had to shout in order to be heard.

*"Sheemie! Give me a couple of those big-bangers!"*

Sheemie had taken a pocketful from Susan's saddlebag and now handed a pair of them over. Roland took Bert by the arm and pulled him forward. There was a square of rusty fencing around the derrick, and when the boys tried to climb it, the horizontals snapped like old bones. They looked at each other in the running shadows combined of machinery and moonlight, nervous and amused.

Susan twitched Roland's arm. *"Be careful!"* she shouted over the rhythmic *whumpa-whumpa-whumpa* of the derrick machinery. She didn't look frightened, he saw, only excited and alert.

He grinned, pulled her forward, and kissed the lobe of her ear. "Be ready to run," he whispered. "If we do this right, there's going to be a new candle here at Citgo. A hellacious big one."

He and Cuthbert ducked under the lowest strut of the rusty derrick tower and stood next to the equipment, wincing at the cacophony. Roland wondered that it hadn't torn itself apart years ago. Most of the works were housed in rusty metal blocks, but he could see a gigantic turning shaft of some kind, gleaming with oil that must be supplied by automated jets. Up this close, there was a gassy smell that reminded him of the jet that flared rhythmically on the other side of the oilpatch.

*"Giant-farts!"* Cuthbert shouted.

*"What?"*

*"I said it smells like . . . aw, never mind! Let's do it if-we can ... can we? "*

Roland didn't know. He walked toward the machinery crying out beneath metal cowls which were painted a faded, rusting green. Bert followed with some

reluctance. The two of them slid into a short aisle, smelly and baking hot, that took them almost directly beneath the derrick. Ahead of them, the shaft at the end of the piston turned steadily, shedding oily teardrops down its smooth sides. Beside it was a curved pipe—almost surely an overflow pipe, Roland thought. An occasional drop of crude oil fell from its lip, and there was a black puddle on the ground beneath. He pointed at it, and Cuthbert nodded.

Shouting would do no good in here; the world was a roaring, squeal-ing din. Roland curled one hand around his friend's neck and pulled Cuthbert's ear to his lips; he held a big-bang up in front of Bert's eyes with the other.

"Light it and run," he said. "I'll hold it, give you as much time as I can. That's for my benefit as much as for yours. I want a clear path back through that machinery, do you understand?"

Cuthbert nodded against Roland's lips, then turned the gunslinger's head so he could speak in the same fashion. "What if there's enough gas here to bum the air when I make a spark?"

Roland stepped back. Raised his palms in a "How-do-I-know?" gesture. Cuthbert laughed and drew out a box of sulfur matches which he had scooped off Avery's desk before leaving. He asked with his eyebrows if Roland was ready. Roland nodded.

The wind was blowing hard, but under the derrick the surrounding machinery cut it off and the flame from the sulfur rose straight. Roland held out the big-banger, and had a momentary, painful memory of his mother: how she had hated these things, how she had always been sure that he would lose an eye or a finger to one. Cuthbert tapped his chest above his heart and kissed his palm in the universal gesture of good luck. Then he touched the flame to the fuse. It began to sputter. Bert turned, pretended to bang off a covered block of machinery—that was Bert, Roland thought; he would joke on the gallows—and then dashed back down the short corridor they'd used to get here.

Roland held the round firework as long as he dared, then lobbed it into the overflow pipe. He winced as he turned away, half-expecting what Bert was afraid of: that the very air would explode. It didn't. He ran down the short aisle, came into the clear, and saw Cuthbert standing just outside the broken bit of fencing. Roland flapped both hands at him—*Go, you idiot, go!*—and then the world blew up behind him.

The sound was a deep, belching thud that seemed to shove his eardrums inward and suck the breath out of his throat. The ground rolled under his feet like a wave under a boat, and a large, warm hand planted it-self in the center of his back and shoved him forward. He thought he ran with it for a step—maybe even two or three steps—and then he was lifted off his feet and hurled at the fence, where Cuthbert was no longer stand-ing; Cuthbert was sprawled on his back, staring up at something behind Roland. The boy's eyes were wide and wondering; his mouth hung open. Roland could see all this very well, because Citgo was now as bright as in full daylight. They had lit their own Reaping bonfire, it seemed, a night early and much brighter than the one in town could ever hope to be.

He went skidding on his knees to where Cuthbert lay, and grabbed him under one arm. From behind them came a vast, ripping roar, and now chunks of metal began to fall around them. They got up and ran toward where Alain stood in front of Susan and Sheemie, trying to protect them.

Roland took a quick look back over his shoulder and saw that the re-mains of the derrick—about half of it still stood—were glowing blackish red, like a heated horseshoe, around a flaring yellow torch that ran per-haps a hundred and fifty feet into the sky. It was a start. He didn't know how many other derricks they could fire before folk began arriving from town, but he was determined to do as many as possible, no matter what the risks might be. Blowing up the tankers at Hanging Rock was only half the job. Farson's *source* had to be wiped out.

Further firecrackers dropped down further overflow pipes turned out not to be necessary. There was a network of interconnected pipes under the oilpatch, most filled with natural gas that had leaked in through an-cient, decaying seals. Roland and Cuthbert had no more than reached the others when there was a fresh explosion, and a fresh tower of flame erupted from a derrick to the right of the one they had set afire. A moment later, a third derrick—this one sixty full yards away from the first two— exploded with a dragon's roar. The ironwork tore free of its anchoring concrete pillars like a tooth pulled from a decayed gum. It rose on a cush-ion of blazing blue and yellow, attained a height of perhaps seventy feet, then heeled over and came crashing back down, spewing sparks in every direction. Another. Another. And yet another.

The five young people stood in their comer, stunned, holding their hands up to shield their eyes from the glare. Now the oilpatch flared like a birthday cake, and

the heat baking toward them was enormous.

"Gods be kind," Alain whispered.

If they lingered here much longer, Roland realized, they would be popped like corn. There were the horses to consider, too; they were well away from the main focus of the explosions, but there was no guarantee that the focus would stay where it was; already he saw two derricks that hadn't even been working engulfed in flames. The horses would be terrified.

Hell, *he* was terrified.

"Come on!" he shouted.

They ran for the horses through shifting yellow-orange brilliance.

### 3

At first Jonas thought it was going on in his own head—that the explosions were part of their lovemaking.

Lovemaking, yar. Lovemaking, horseshit. He and Coral made love no more than donkeys did sums. But it was *something*. Oh yes indeed it was.

He'd been with passionate women before, ones who took you into a kind of oven-plate and then held you there, staring with greedy intensity as they pumped their hips, but until Coral he'd never been with a woman that sparked such a powerfully harmonic chord in himself. With sex, he had always been the kind of man who took it when it came and forgot it when it didn't. But with Coral he only wanted to take it, take it, and take it some more. When they were together they made love like cats or ferrets, twisting and hissing and clawing; they bit at each other and cursed at each other, and so far none of it was even close to enough. When he was with her, Jonas sometimes felt as if he were being fried in sweet oil.

Tonight there had been a meeting with the Horsemen's Association, which had pretty much become the Farson Association in these latter days. Jonas had brought them up to date, had answered their idiotic questions, and had made sure they understood what they'd be doing the next day. With that done, he had checked on Rhea, who had been installed in Kimba Rimer's old suite. She hadn't even noticed Jonas peering in at her. She sat in Rimer's high-ceilinged, book-lined study—behind Rimer's ironwood desk, in Rimer's upholstered chair, looking as out of place as a whore's bloomers on a church altar. On Rimer's desk was the

Wizard's Rainbow. She was passing her hands back and forth above it and mutter-ing rapidly under her breath, but the ball remained dark.

Jonas had locked her in and had gone to Coral. She had been waiting for him in the parlor where tomorrow's Conversational would have been held. There were plenty of bedrooms in that wing, but it was to her dead brother's that she had led him ... and not by accident, either, Jonas was sure. There they made love in the canopied bed Hart Thorin would never share with his gilly.

It was fierce, as it had always been, and Jonas was approaching his or-gasm when the first oil derrick blew. *Christ, she's something*, he thought. *There's never in the whole damned world been a woman like—*

Then two more explosions, in rapid succession, and Coral froze for a moment beneath him before beginning to thrust her hips again. "Citgo," she said in a hoarse, panting voice.

"Yar," he growled, and began to thrust with her. He had lost all inter-est in making love, but they had reached the point where it was impossi-ble to stop, even under threat of death or dismemberment.

Two minutes later he was striding, naked, toward Thorin's little lick of a balcony, his half-erect penis wagging from side to side ahead of him like some halfwit's idea of a magic wand. Coral was a step behind him, as naked as he was.

"Why now?" she burst out as Jonas thrust open the balcony door. "I could have come three more times!"

Jonas ignored her. The countryside looking northwest was a moon-gilded darkness . . . except where the oilpatch was. There he saw a fierce yellow core of light. It was spreading and brightening even as he watched; one thudding explosion after another hammered across the intervening miles.

He felt a curious darkening in his mind—that feeling had been there ever since the brat, Dearborn, by the some febrile leap of intuition, had recognized him for who and what he was. Making love to the energetic Coral melted that feeling a little, but now, looking at the burning tangle of fire which had five minutes ago been the Good Man's oil reserves, it came back with debilitating intensity, like a swamp-fever that sometimes quits the flesh but hides in the bones and never really leaves. *You 're in the west*, Dearborn had said. *The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west*. Of course it was true, and he hadn't needed any such titmonkey as Will Dearborn to tell him ... but now that it had been said, there was a part of his



mind that couldn't stop thinking about it.

Fucking Will Dearborn. Where, exactly, was he now, him and his pair of good-mannered mates? In Avery's *culabo*? Jonas didn't think so. Not anymore.

Fresh explosions ripped the night. Down below, men who had run and shouted in the wake of the early morning's assassinations were running and shouting again.

"It's the biggest Reaping firework that ever was," Coral said in a low voice.

Before Jonas could reply, there was a hard hammering on the bed-room door. It was thrown open a second later, and Clay Reynolds came clumping across the room, wearing a pair of blue jeans and nothing else. His hair was wild; his eyes were wilder.

"Bad news from town, Eldred," he said. "Dearborn and the other two In-World brats"

Three more explosions, falling almost on top of each other. From the blazing Citgo oilpatch a great red-orange fireball rose lazily into the black of night, faded, disappeared. Reynolds walked out onto the balcony and stood between them at the railing, unmindful of their nakedness. He stared at the fireball with wide, wondering eyes until it was gone. As gone as the brats. Jonas felt that curious, debilitating gloom trying to steal over him again.

"How did they get away?" he asked. "Do you know? Does Avery?"

"Avery's dead. The deputy who was with him, too. 'Twas another deputy found em, Todd Bridger . . . Eldred, what's going on out there? What happened?"

"Oh, that's your boys," Coral said. "Didn't take em long to start their own Reaping party, did it?"

*How much heart do they have?* Jonas asked himself. It was a good question—maybe the only one that mattered. Were they now done making trouble . . . or just getting started?

He once more wanted to be out of here—out of Seafront, out of Hambry, out of Mejis. Suddenly, more than anything, he wanted to be miles and wheels and leagues away. He had bounded around his Hillock, it was too late to go back, and now he felt horribly exposed.

"Clay."

"Yes, Eldred?"

But the man's eyes—and his mind—were still on the conflagration at Citgo. Jonas took his shoulder and turned Reynolds toward him. Jonas felt his own mind

starting to pick up speed, ticking past points and details, and welcomed the feeling. That queer, dark sense of fatalism faded and disappeared.

"How many men are here?" he asked.

Reynolds frowned, thought about it. "Thirty-five." he said. "Maybe."

"How many armed?"

"With guns?"

"No, with pea-blowers, you damned fool."

"Probably . . ." Reynolds pulled his lower lip, frowning more fiercely than ever.

"Probably a dozen. That's guns likely to work, you ken."

"The big boys from the Horsemen's Association? Still all here?"

"I think so."

"Get Lengyll and Renfrew. At least you won't have to wake em up; they'll *all* be up, and most of em right down there." Jonas jerked a thumb at the courtyard. "Tell Renfrew to put together an advance party. Armed men. I'd like eight or ten, but I'll take five. Have that old woman's cart harnessed to the strongest, hardiest pony this place has got. Tell that old fuck Miguel that if the pony he chooses dies in the traces between here and Hanging Rock, he'll be using his wrinkled old balls for earplugs."

Coral Thorin barked brief, harsh laughter. Reynolds glanced at her, did a double-take at her breasts, then looked back at Jonas with an effort.

"Where's Roy?" Jonas asked.

Reynolds looked up. "Third floor. With some little serving maid."

"Kick him out," Jonas said. "It's his job to get the old bitch ready to ride."

"We're going?"

"Soon as we can. You and me first, with Renfrew's boys, and Lengyll behind, with the rest of the men. You just make sure Hash Renfrew's with us, Clay; that man's got sand in his craw."

"What about the horses out on the Drop?"

"Never mind the everfucking horses." There was another explosion at Citgo; another fireball floated into the sky. Jonas couldn't see the dark clouds of smoke which must be rushing up, or smell the oil; the wind, out of the east and into the west, would be carrying both away from town.

"But—"

"Just do as I say." Jonas now saw his priorities in clear, ascending or-der. The

horses were on the bottom—Farson could find horses damned near anywhere. Above them were the tankers gathered at Hanging Rock. They were more important than ever now, because the source was gone. Lose the tankers, and the Big Coffin Hunters could forget going home.

Yet most important of all was Parson's little piece of the Wizard's Rainbow. It was the one truly irreplaceable item. If it was broken, let it be broken in the care of George Latigo, not that of Eldred Jonas.

"Get moving," he told Reynolds. "Depape rides after, with Lengyll's men. You with me. Go on. Make it happen."

"And me?" Coral asked.

He reached out and tugged her toward him. "I ain't forgot you, darlin," he said. Coral nodded and reached between his legs, oblivious of the staring Clay Reynolds. "Aye," she said. "And I ain't forgot you."

#### 4

They escaped Citgo with ringing ears and slightly singed around the edges but not really hurt, Sheemie riding double behind Cuthbert and Caprichoso clattering after, at the end of his long lead.

It was Susan who came up with the place they should go, and like most solutions, it seemed completely obvious . . . once someone had thought of it. And so, not long after Reaping Eve had become Reaping Mom, the five of them came to the hut in the Bad Grass where Susan and Roland had on several occasions met to make love.

Cuthbert and Alain unrolled blankets, then sat on them to examine the guns they had liberated from the Sheriff's office. They had also found Bert's slingshot.

"These're hard calibers," Alain said, holding one up with the cylinder sprung and peering one-eyed down the barrel. "If they don't throw too high or wide, Roland, I think we can do some business with them."

"I wish we had that rancher's machine-gun," Cuthbert said wistfully.

"You know what Cort would say about a gun like that?" Roland asked, and Cuthbert burst out laughing. So did Alain.

"Who's Cort?" Susan asked.

"The tough man Eldred Jonas only thinks he is," Alain said. "He was our teacher."

Roland suggested that they catch an hour or two of sleep—the next day was apt to be difficult. That it might also be their last was something he didn't feel he had to say.

"Alain, are you listening?"

Alain, who knew perfectly well that Roland wasn't speaking of his ears or his attention-span, nodded.

"Do you hear anything?"

"Not yet."

"Keep at it."

"I will . . . but I can't promise anything. The touch is flukey. You know that as well as I do."

"Just keep trying."

Sheemie had carefully spread two blankets in the comer next to his proclaimed best friend. "He's Roland . . . and *he's* Alain . . . who are you, good old Arthur Heath? Who are you really?"

"Cuthbert's my name." He stuck out his hand. "Cuthbert Allgood. How do y'do, and how do y'do, and how do y'do again?"

Sheemie shook the offered hand, then began giggling. It was a cheer-ful, unexpected sound, and made them all smile. Smiling hurt Roland a little, and he guessed that if he could see his own face, he'd observe a pretty good bum from being so close to the exploding derricks.

"Key-youth-bert," Sheemie said, giggling. "Oh my! Key-youth-bert, that's a funny name, no wonder you're such a funny fellow. Key-youth-bert, oh-aha-ha-ha, that's a pip, a real pip!"

Cuthbert smiled and nodded. "Can I kill him now, Roland, if we don't need him any longer?"

"Save him a bit, why don't you?" Roland said, then turned to Susan, his own smile fading. "Will thee walk out with me a bit, Sue? I'd talk to thee."

She looked up at him, trying to read his face. "All right." She held out her hand. Roland took it, they walked into the moonlight together, and be-neath its light, Susan felt dread take hold of her heart.

They walked out in silence, through sweet-smelling grass that tasted good to cows and horses even as it was expanding in their bellies, first bloating and then killing them. It was high—at least a foot taller than Roland's head—and still green as summer. Children sometimes got lost in the Bad Grass and died there, but Susan had never feared to be here with Roland, even when there were no sky-markers to steer by; his sense of direction was uncannily perfect.

"Sue, thee disobeyed me in the matter of the guns," he said at last.

She looked at him, smiling, half-amused and half-angry. "Does thee wish to be back in thy cell, then? Thee and thy friends?"

"No, of course not. Such bravery!" He held her close and kissed her. When he drew back, they were both breathing hard. He took her by the arms and looked into her eyes. "But thee mustn't disobey me this time."

She looked at him steadily, saying nothing.

"Thee knows," he said. "Thee knows what I'd tell thee."

"Aye, perhaps."

"Say. Better you than me, maybe."

"I'm to stay at the hut while you and the others go. Sheemie and I are to stay."

He nodded. "Will you? Will *thee*?"

She thought of how unfamiliar and wretched Roland's gun had felt in her hand as she held it beneath the *serape*; of the wide, unbelieving look in Dave's eyes as the bullet she'd fired into his chest flung him backward; of how the first time she'd tried to shoot Sheriff Avery, the bullet had only succeeded in setting her own clothing afire, although he had been right there in front of her. They didn't have a gun for her (unless she took one of Roland's), she couldn't use one very well in any case ... and, more im-portant, she didn't *want* to use one. Under those circumstances, and with Sheemie to think about, too, it was best she just stay out of the way.

Roland was waiting patiently. She nodded. "Sheemie and I'll wait for thee. It's my promise."

He smiled, relieved.

"Now pay me back with honesty, Roland."

"If I can."

She looked up at the moon, shuddered at the ill-omened face she saw, and looked back at Roland. "What chance thee'll come back to me?"

He thought about this very carefully, still holding to her arms. "Far better than Jonas thinks," he said at last. "We'll wait at the edge of the Bad Grass and should be able to mark his coming well enough."

"Aye, the herd o' horses I saw—"

"He may come without the horses," Roland said, not knowing how well he had matched Jonas's thinking, "but his folk will make noise even if they come without the herd. If there's enough of them, we'll see them, as well—they'll cut a line through the grass like a part in hair."

Susan nodded. She had seen this many times from the Drop—the mysterious parting of the Bad Grass as groups of men rode through it.

"If they're looking for thee, Roland? If Jonas sends scouts ahead?"

"I doubt he'll bother." Roland shrugged. "If they do, why, we'll kill them. Silent, if we can. Killing's what we were trained to do; we'll do it."

She turned her hands over, and now she was gripping his arms instead of the other way around. She looked impatient and afraid. "Thee hasn't answered my question. What chance I'll see thee back?"

He thought it over. "Even toss," he said at last.

She closed her eyes as if struck, drew in a breath, let it out, opened her eyes again.

"Bad," she said, "yet maybe not as bad as I thought. And if thee doesn't come back? Sheemie and I go west, as thee said before?"

"Aye, to Gilead. There'll be a place of safety and respect for you there, dear, no matter what . . . but it's especially important that you go if you *don't* hear the tankers explode. Thee knows that, doesn't thee?"

"To warn yer people—thy *ka-tet*."

Roland nodded.

"I'll warn them, no fear. And keep Sheemie safe, too. He's as much the reason we've got this far as anything I've done."

Roland was counting on Sheemie for more than she knew. If he and Bert and Alain *were* killed, it was Sheemie who would stabilize her, give her reason to go on.

"When does thee leave?" Susan asked. "Do we have time to make love?"

"We have time, but perhaps it's best we don't," he said. "It's going to be hard enough to leave thee again without. Unless you really want to . . ." His eyes half-pleaded with her to say yes.

"Let's just go back and lie down a bit," she said, and took his hand. For a moment it trembled on her lips to tell him that she was kindled with his child, but at the last moment she kept silent. There was enough for him to think about without that added, mayhap ... and she didn't want to pass such happy news beneath such an ugly moon. It would surely be bad luck.

They walked back through high grass that was already springing together along their path. Outside the hut, he turned her toward him, put his hands on her cheeks, and softly kissed her again.

"I will love thee forever, Susan," he said. "Come whatever storms."

She smiled. The upward movement of her cheeks spilled a pair of tears from her eyes. "Come whatever storms," she agreed. She kissed him again, and they went inside.

## 6

The moon had begun to descend when a party of eight rode out beneath the arch with come in peace writ upon it in the Great Letters. Jonas and Reynolds were in the lead. Behind them came Rhea's black wagon, drawn by a trotting pony that looked strong enough to go all night and half the next day. Jonas had wanted to give her a driver, but Rhea refused—"Never was an animal I didn't get on with better than any man ever could," she'd told him, and that seemed to be true. The reins lay limp in her lap; the pony worked smart without them. The other five men consisted of Hash Renfrew, Quint, and three of Renfrew's best *vaqueros*.

Coral had wanted to come as well, but Jonas had different ideas. "If we're killed, you can go on more or less as before," he'd said. "There'll be nothing to tie you to us."

"Without ye, I'm not sure there'd be any reason *to* go on," she said.

"Ar, quit that schoolgirl shit, it don't become you. You'd find plenty of reasons to keep staggerin down the path, if you had to put your mind to it. If all goes well—as I expect it will—and you still want to be with me, ride out of here as soon as you get word of our success. There's a town west of here in the Vi Castis Mountains. Ritzy. Go there on the fastest horse you can swing a leg over. You'll be there ahead of us by days, no matter how smart we're able to push along. Find a respectable inn that'll take a woman on her own . . . if there is such a thing in

Ritzzy. Wait. When we get there with the tankers, you just fall into the column at my right hand. Have you got it?"

She had it. One woman in a thousand was Coral Thorin—sharp as Lord Satan, and able to fuck like Satan's favorite harlot. Now if things only turned out to be as simple as he'd made them sound.

Jonas fell back until his horse was pacing alongside the black cart. The ball was out of its bag and lay in Rhea's lap. "Anything?" he asked. He both hoped and dreaded to see that deep pink pulse inside it again.

"Nay. It'll speak when it needs to, though—count on it."

"Then what good are *you*, old woman?"

"Ye'll know when the time comes," Rhea said, looking at him with arrogance (and some fear as well, he was happy to see).

Jonas spurred his horse back to the head of the little column. He had decided to take the ball from Rhea at the slightest sign of trouble. In truth, it had already inserted its strange, addicting sweetness into his head; he thought about that single pink pulse of light he'd seen far too much.

*Balls*, he told himself. *Battlesweat's all I've got. Once this business is over, I'll be my old self again.*

Nice if true, but...

... but he had, in truth, begun to wonder.

Renfrew was now riding with Clay. Jonas nudged his horse in between them. His dicky leg was aching like a bastard; another bad sign.

"Lengyll?" he asked Renfrew.

"Putting together a good bunch," Renfrew said, "don't you fear Fran Lengyll. Thirty men."

"Thirty! God Harry's body, I told you I wanted forty! Forty at least!"

Renfrew measured him with a pale-eyed glance, then winced at a particularly vicious gust of the freshening wind. He pulled his neckerchief up over his mouth and nose. The *vaqs* riding behind had already done so. "How afraid of these three boys are you, Jonas?"

"Afraid for both of us, I guess, since you're too stupid to know who they are or what they're capable of." He raised his own neckerchief, then forced his voice into a more reasonable timbre. It was best he do so; he needed these bumpkins yet awhile longer. Once the ball was turned over to Latigo, that might change.



"Though mayhap we'll never see them."

"It's likely they're already thirty miles from here and riding west as fast as their horses'll take em," Renfrew agreed. "I'd give a crown to know how they got loose."

*What does it matter, you idiot?* Jonas thought, but said nothing.

"As for Lengyll's men, they'll be the hardest boys he can lay hands on—if it comes to a fight, those thirty will fight like sixty."

Jonas's eyes briefly met Clay's. *I'll believe it when I see it*, Clay's brief glance said, and Jonas knew again why he had always liked this one better than Roy Depape.

"How many armed?"

"With guns? Maybe half. They'll be no more than an hour behind us."

"Good." At least their back door was covered. It would have to do. And he couldn't wait to be rid of that thrice-cursed ball.

*Oh?* whispered a sly, half-mad voice from a place much deeper than his heart. *Oh, can't you?*

Jonas ignored the voice until it stilled. Half an hour later, they turned off the road and onto the Drop. Several miles ahead, moving in the wind like a silver sea, was the Bad Grass.



## 7

Around the time that Jonas and his party were riding down the Drop, Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain were swinging up into their saddles. Susan and Sheemie stood by the doorway to the hut, holding hands and watching them solemnly.

"Thee'll hear the explosions when the tankers go, and smell the smoke," Roland said. "Even with the wind the wrong way, I think thee'll smell it. Then, no more than an hour later, more smoke. There." He pointed. "That'll be the brush piled in front of the canyon's mouth."

"And if we don't see those things?"

"Into the west. But thee will, Sue. I swear thee will."

She stepped forward, put her hands on his thigh, and looked up at him in the latening moonlight. He bent; put his hand lightly against the back of her head; put his mouth on her mouth.

"Go thy course in safety," Susan said as she drew back from him.

"Aye," Sheemie added suddenly. "Stand and be true, all three." He came forward himself and shyly touched Cuthbert's boot.

Cuthbert reached down, took Sheemie's hand, and shook it. "Take care of her, old boy."

Sheemie nodded seriously. "I will."

"Come on," Roland said. He felt that if he looked at her solemn, up-turned face again, he would cry. "Let's go."

They rode slowly away from the hut. Before the grass closed behind them, hiding it from view, he looked back a final time.

"Sue, I love thee."

She smiled. It was a beautiful smile. "Bird and bear and hare and fish," she said. The next time Roland saw her, she was caught inside the Wizard's glass.

## 8

What Roland and his friends saw west of the Bad Grass had a harsh, lonely beauty. The wind was lifting great sheets of sand across the stony desert floor; the moonlight turned these into foot racing phantoms. At moments Hanging Rock was visible some two wheels distant, and the mouth of Eyebolt Canyon two wheels farther on. Sometimes both were gone, hidden by the dust. Behind them, the tall grass made a sougning, singing sound.

"How do you boys feel?" Roland asked. "All's well?"

They nodded.

"There's going to be a lot of shooting, I think."

"We'll remember the faces of our fathers," Cuthbert said.

"Yes," Roland agreed, almost absently. "We'll remember them very well." He stretched in the saddle. "The wind's in our favor, not theirs— that's one good thing. We'll hear them coming. We must judge the size of the group. All right?"

They both nodded.

"If Jonas has still got his confidence, he'll come soon, in a small party—whatever gunnies he can put together on short notice—and he'll have the ball. In that case, we'll ambush them, kill them all, and take the Wizard's Rainbow."

Alain and Cuthbert sat quiet, listening intently. The wind gusted, and Roland clapped a hand to his hat to keep it from flying off. "If he fears more trouble from us, I think he's apt to come later on, and with a bigger party of riders. If that happens, we'll let them pass . . . then, if the wind is our friend and keeps up, we'll fall in behind them."

Cuthbert began to grin. "Oh Roland," he said. "Your father would be proud. Only fourteen, but cozy as the devil!"

"Fifteen come next moonrise," Roland said seriously. "If we do it this way, we may have to kill their drogue riders. Watch my signals, all right?"

"We're going to cross to Hanging Rock as part of their party?" Alain asked. He had always been a step or two behind Cuthbert, but Roland didn't mind; sometimes reliability was better than quickness. "Is that it?"

"If the cards fall that way, yes."

"If they've got the pink ball with em, you'd better hope it doesn't give us away," Alain said.

Cuthbert looked surprised. Roland bit his lip, thinking that sometimes Alain was plenty quick. Certainly he had come up with this unpleasant little idea ahead of Bert . . . ahead of Roland, too.

"We've got a lot to hope for this morning, but we'll play our cards as they come off the top of the pack."

They dismounted and sat by their horses there on the edge of the grass, saying little. Roland watched the silver clouds of dust racing each other across the desert floor and thought of Susan. He imagined them married, living in a freehold somewhere south of Gilead. By then Farson would have been defeated, the world's strange decline reversed (the childish part of him simply assumed that making an end to John Farson would somehow see to that), and his gunslinging days would be over. Less than a year it had been since he had won the right to carry the six-shooters he wore on his hips—and to carry his father's great revolvers when Steven Deschain decided to pass them on—and already he was tired of them. Susan's kisses had softened his heart and quickened him, some-how; had made another life possible. A better one, perhaps. One with a house, and kiddies, and—

"They're coming," Alain said, snapping Roland out of his reverie. The gunslinger stood up, Rusher's reins in one fist. Cuthbert stood tensely nearby. "Large party or small? Does thee ... do you know?"

Alain stood facing southeast, hands held out with the palms up. Beyond his shoulder, Roland saw Old Star just about to slip below the horizon. Only an hour until dawn, then.

"I can't tell yet," Alain said.

"Can you at least tell if the ball—"

"No. Shut up, Roland, let me listen!"

Roland and Cuthbert stood and watched Alain anxiously, at the same time straining their ears to hear the hooves of horses, the creak of wheels, or the murmur of men on the passing wind. Time spun out. The wind, rather than dropping as Old Star disappeared and dawn approached, blew more fiercely than ever. Roland looked at Cuthbert, who had taken out his slingshot and was playing nervously with the pull. Bert raised one shoulder in a shrug.

"It's a small party," Alain said suddenly. "Can either of you touch them?"

They shook their heads.

"No more than ten, maybe only six."

"Gods!" Roland murmured, and pumped a fist at the sky. He couldn't help it. "And the ball?"

"I can't touch it," Alain said. He sounded almost as though he were sleeping himself. "But it's with them, don't you think?"

Roland did. A small party of six or eight, probably travelling with the ball. It was perfect.

"Be ready, boys," he said. "We're going to take them."

## 9

Jonas's party made good time down the Drop and into the Bad Grass. The guide-stars were brilliant in the autumn sky, and Renfrew knew them all. He had a click-line to measure between the two he called The Twins, and he stopped the group briefly every twenty minutes or so to use it. Jonas hadn't the slightest doubt the old cowboy would bring them out of the tall grass pointed straight at Hanging Rock. Then, about an hour after they'd entered the Bad Grass, Quint rode up beside him.

"That old lady, she want to see you, sai. She say it's important."

"Do she, now?" Jonas asked.

"Aye." Quint lowered his voice. "That ball she got on her lap all glowy."

"Is that so? I tell you what. Quint—keep my old trail-buddies com-pany while I see what's what." He dropped back until he was pacing be-side the black cart.

Rhea raised her face to him, and for a moment, washed as it was in the pink light, he thought it the face of a young girl.

"So," she said. "Here y'are, big boy. I thought ye'd show up pretty smart." She cackled, and as her face broke into its sour lines of laughter, Jonas again saw her as she really was—all but sucked dry by the thing in her lap. Then he looked down at it himself . . . and was lost. He could feel that pink glow radiating into all the deepest passages and hollows of his mind, lighting them up in a way they'd never been lit up before. Even Coral, at her dirty busiest, couldn't light him up that way.

"Ye like it, don't ye?" she half-laughed, half-crooned. "Aye, so ye do, so would anyone, such a pretty glam it is! But what do ye *see*, sai Jonas?"

Leaning over, holding to the saddle-horn with one hand, his long hair hanging down in a sheaf, Jonas looked deeply into the ball. At first he saw only that luscious, labial pink, and then it began to draw apart. Now he saw a hut surrounded by tall grass. The sort of hut only a hermit could love. The door—it was painted a peeling but still bright red—stood open. And sitting there on the stone stoop with her hands in her lap, her blankets on the ground at her feet, and her unbound hair around her shoulders was ...

"I'll be damned!" Jonas whispered. He had now leaned so far out of the saddle that he looked like a trick rider in a circus show, and his eyes seemed to have disappeared; there were only sockets of pink light where they had been.

Rhea cackled delightedly. "Aye, it's Thorin's gilly that never was! Dearborn's lovergirl!" Her cackling stopped abruptly. "Lovergirl of the young proddy who killed my Ermot. And he'll pay for it, aye, so he will. Look closer, sai Jonas! Look closer!"

He did. Everything was clear now, and he thought he should have seen it earlier. Everything this girl's aunt had feared had been true. Rhea had known, although why she hadn't told anyone the girl had been screw-ing one of the In-World boys, Jonas didn't know. And Susan had done more than just screw Will Dearborn; she'd helped him escape, him and his trail-mates, and she might well have killed two

lawmen for him, into the bargain.

The figure in the ball swam closer. Watching that made him feel a little dizzy, but it was a pleasant dizziness. Beyond the girl was the hut, faintly lit by a lamp which had been turned down to the barest core of flame. At first Jonas thought someone was sleeping in one corner, but on second glance he decided it was only a heap of hides that looked vaguely human.

"Do'ee spy the boys?" Rhea asked, seemingly from a great distance. "Do'ee spy em, m'lord sai?"

"No," he said, his own voice seeming to come from that same distant place. His eyes were pinned to the ball. He could feel its light baking deeper and deeper into his brain. It was a good feeling, like a hot fire on a cold night. "She's alone. Looks as if she's waiting."

"Aye." Rhea gestured above the ball—a curt dusting-off movement of the hands—and the pink light was gone. Jonas gave a low, protesting cry, but no matter; the ball was dark again. He wanted to stretch his hands out and tell her to make the light return—to beg her, if necessary—and held himself back by pure force of will. He was rewarded by a slow return of his wits. It helped to remind himself that Rhea's gestures were as meaningless as the puppets in a Pinch and Jilly show. The ball did what *it* wanted, not what *she* wanted.

Meanwhile, the ugly old woman was looking at him with eyes that were perversely shrewd and clear. "Waiting for what, do'ee suppose?" she asked. There was only one thing she *could* be waiting for. Jonas thought with rising alarm. The boys. The three beardless sons of bitches from In-World. And if they weren't with her, they might well be up ahead, doing their own waiting.

Waiting for him. Possibly even waiting for—

"Listen to me," he said. "I'll only speak once, and you best answer true. Do they know about that thing? *Do those three boys know about the Rainbow?*"

Her eyes shifted away from his. It was answer enough in one way, but not in another. She had had things her way all too long up there on her hill; she had to know who was boss down here. He leaned over again and grabbed her shoulder. It was horrible—like grabbing a bare bone that somehow still lived—but he made himself hold on all the same. And squeeze. She moaned and wriggled, but he held on.

"Tell me, you old bitch! Run your fucking gob!"

"They might know of it," she whined. "The girl might've seen some-thing the night she came to be—am-, let go, ye're killing me!"

"If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead." He took another longing glance at the ball, then sat up straight in the saddle, cupped his hands around his mouth, and called: "Clay! Hold up!" As Reynolds and Ren-frew reined back, Jonas raised a hand to halt the *vaqs* behind him.

The wind whispered through the grass, bending it, rippling it, whip-ping up eddies of sweet smell. Jonas stared ahead into the dark, even though he knew it was fruitless to look for them. They could be any-where, and Jonas didn't like the odds in an ambush. Not one bit.

He rode to where Clay and Renfrew were waiting. Renfrew looked impatient.

"What's the problem? Dawn'll be breaking soon. We ought to get a move-on."

"Do you know the huts in the Bad Grass?"

"Aye, most. Why—"

"Do you know one with a red door?"

Renfrew nodded and pointed northish. "Old Soony's place. He had some sort of religious conversion—a dream or a vision or something. That's when he painted the door of his hut red. He's gone to the Manni-folk these last five years." He no longer asked why, at least; he had seen something on Jonas's face that had shut up his questions.

Jonas raised his hand, looked at the blue coffin tattooed there for a second, then turned and called for Quint. "You're in charge," Jonas told him.

Quint's shaggy eyebrows shot up. "*Me?*"

"Yar. But you're not going on—there's been a change of plan."

"What—"

"Listen and don't open your mouth again unless there's something you don't understand. Get that damned black cart turned around. Put your men around it and hie on back the way we came. Join up with Lengyll and his men. Tell them Jonas says wait where you find em until he and Rey-nolds and Renfrew come. Clear?"

Quint nodded. He looked bewildered but said nothing.

"Good. Get about it. And tell the witch to put her toy back in its bag." Jonas passed a hand over his brow. Fingers which had rarely shaken before had now picked up a minute tremble. "It's distracting."

Quint started away, then looked back when Jonas called his name.



"I think those In-World boys are out here, Quint. Probably ahead of where we are now, but if they're back the way you're going, they'll probably set on you." Quint looked nervously around at the grass, which rose higher than his head. Then his lips tightened and he returned his attention to Jonas.

"If they attack, they'll try to take the ball," Jonas continued. "And sai, mark me well: any man who doesn't die protecting it will wish he had." He lifted his chin at the *vaqs*, who sat astride their horses in a line behind the black cart. "Tell them that."

"Aye, boss," Quint said.

"When you reach Lengyll's party, you'll be safe."

"How long should we wait for yer if ye don't come?"

"Til hell freezes over. Now go." As Quint left, Jonas turned to Reynolds and Renfrew. "We're going to make a little side-trip, boys," he said.

## 10

"Roland." Alain's voice was low and urgent. "They've turned around."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. There's another group coming along behind them. A much larger one. That's where they're headed."

"Safety in numbers, that's all," Cuthbert said.

"Do they have the ball?" Roland asked. "Can you touch it yet?"

"Yes, they have it. It makes them easy to touch even though they're going the other way now. Once you find it, it glows like a lamp in a mineshaft."

"Does Rhea still have the keeping of it?"

"I think so. It's awful to touch her."

"Jonas is afraid of us," Roland said. "He wants more men around him when he comes. That's what it is, what it must be." Unaware that he was both right and badly out in his reckoning. Unaware that for one of the few times since they had left Gilead, he had lapsed into a teenager's disastrous certainty.

"What do we do?" Alain asked.

"Sit here. Listen. Wait. They'll bring the ball this way again if they're going to Hanging Rock. They'll have to."

"Susan?" Cuthbert asked. "Susan and Sheemie? What about them? How do we

know they're all right?"

"I suppose that we don't." Roland sat down, cross-legged, with Pusher's trailing reins in his lap. "But Jonas and his men will be back soon enough. And when they come, we'll do what we must."

## 11

Susan hadn't wanted to sleep inside—the hut felt wrong to her without Roland. She had left Sheemie huddled under the old hides in the corner and taken her own blankets outside. She sat in the hut's doorway for a little while, looking up at the stars and praying for Roland in her own fashion. When she began to feel a little better, she lay down on one blanket and pulled the other over her. It seemed an eternity since Maria had shaken her out of her heavy sleep, and the open-mouthed, glottal snores drifting out of the hut didn't bother her much. She slept with her head pillowed on one arm, and didn't wake when, twenty minutes later, Sheemie came to the doorway, blinked at her sleepily, and then walked off into the grass to urinate. The only one to notice him was Caprichoso, who stuck out his long muzzle and took a nip at Sheemie's butt as the boy passed him. Sheemie, still mostly asleep, reached back and pushed the muzzle away. He knew Capi's tricks well enough, so he did.

Susan dreamed of the willow grove—bird and bear and hare and fish—and what woke her wasn't Sheemie's return from his necessary but a cold circle of steel pressing into her neck. There was a loud click that she recognized at once from the Sheriff's office: a pistol being cocked. The willow grove faded from the eye of her mind.

"Shine, little sunbeam," said a voice. For a moment her bewildered, half-waking mind tried to believe it was yesterday, and Maria wanted her to get up and out of Seafront before whoever had killed Mayor Thorin and Chancellor Rimer could come back and kill her, as well.

No good. It wasn't the strong light of midmorning that her eyes opened upon, but the ash-pallid glow of five o'clock. Not a woman's voice but a man's. And not a hand shaking her shoulder but the barrel of a gun against her neck.

She looked up and saw a lined, narrow face framed by white hair. Lips no more than a scar. Eyes the same faded blue as Roland's. Eldred Jonas. The man standing

behind him had bought her own da drinks once upon a happier time: Hash Renfrew. A third man, one of Jonas's *ka-tet*, ducked into the hut. Freezing terror filled her midsection—some for her, some for Sheemie. She wasn't sure the boy would even understand what was happening to them. *These are two of the three men who tried to kill him*, she thought. *He'll understand that much.*

"Here you are, Sunbeam, here you come," Jonas said companionably, watching her blink away the sleepfog. "Good! You shouldn't be napping all the way out here on your own, not a pretty sai such as yourself. But don't worry, I'll see you get back to where you belong."

His eyes flicked up as the redhead with the cloak stepped out of the hut. Alone.

"What's she got in there. Clay? Anything?"

Reynolds shook his head. "All still on the hoss, I reckon."

*Sheemie*, Susan thought. *Where are you, Sheemie?*

Jonas reached out and caressed one of her breasts briefly. "Nice," he said. "Tender and sweet. No wonder Dearborn likes you."

"Get yer filthy blue-marked hand off me, you bastard."

Smiling, Jonas did as she bid. He turned "his head and regarded the mule. "I know this one; it belongs to my good friend Coral. Along with everything else, you've turned livestock thief! Shameful, shameful, this younger generation. Don't you agree, sai Renfrew?"

But her father's old associate said nothing. His face was carefully blank, and Susan thought he might be just the tiniest tad ashamed of his presence here.

Jonas turned back to her, his thin lips curved in the semblance of a benevolent smile. "Well, after murder I suppose stealing a mule comes easy, don't it?"

She said nothing, only watched as Jonas stroked Capi's muzzle.

"What all were they hauling, those boys, that it took a mule to put it on?"

"Shrouds," she said through numb lips. "For you and all yer friends. A fearful heavy load it made, too—near broke the poor animal's back."

"There's a saying in the land I come from," Jonas said, still smiling. "Clever girls go to hell. Ever heard it?" He went on stroking Capi's nose. The mule liked it; his neck was thrust out to its full length, his stupid little eyes half-closed with pleasure. "Has it crossed your mind that fellows who unload their pack animal, split up what it was carrying, and take the goods away usually ain't coming back?" Susan said nothing.

"You've been left high and dry, Sunbeam. Fast fucked is usually fast forgot, sad to say. Do you know where they went?"

"Yes," she said. Her voice was low, barely a whisper.

Jonas looked pleased. "If you was to tell, things might go easier for you. Would you agree, Renfrew?"

"Aye," Renfrew said. "They're traitors, Susan—for the Good Man. If you know where they are or what they're up to, tell us."

Keeping her eyes fixed on Jonas, Susan said: "Come closer." Her numbed lips didn't want to move and it came out sounding like *Cung gloser*, but Jonas understood and leaned forward, stretching his neck in a way that made him look absurdly like Caprichoso. When he did, Susan spat in his face.

Jonas recoiled, lips twisting in surprise and revulsion. "*Arrr! BITCH!*" he cried, and launched a full-swung, open-handed blow that drove her to the ground. She landed at full length on her side with black stars exploding across her field of vision. She could already feel her right cheek swelling like a balloon and thought, *If he'd hit an inch or two lower, he might've broken my neck. Mayhap that would've been best.* She raised her hand to her nose and wiped blood from the right nostril.

Jonas turned to Renfrew, who had taken a single step forward and then stopped himself. "Put her on her horse and tie her hands in front of her. Tight." He looked down at Susan, then kicked her in the shoulder hard enough to send her rolling toward the hut. "Spit on me, would you? Spit on Eldred Jonas, would you, you bitch?"

Reynolds was holding out his neckerchief. Jonas took it, wiped the spittle from his face with it, then dropped into a hunker beside her. He took a handful of her hair and carefully wiped the neckerchief with it. Then he hauled her to her feet. Tears of pain now peeped from the comers of her eyes, but she kept silent.

"I may never see your friend again, sweet Sue with the tender little titties, but I've got you, ain't I? Yar. And if Dearborn gives us trouble, I'll give you double. And make sure Dearborn knows. You may count on it."

His smile faded, and he gave her a sudden, bitter shove that almost sent her sprawling again.

"Now get mounted, and do it before I decide to change your face a little with my knife."

Sheemie watched from the grass, terrified and silently crying, as Susan spit in the bad Coffin Hunter's face and was knocked to the ground, hit so hard the blow might have killed her. He almost rushed out then, but some-thing—it could have been his friend Arthur's voice in his head—told him that would only get *him* killed.

He watched as Susan mounted. One of the other men—not a Coffin Hunter but a big rancher Sheemie had seen in the Rest from time to time—tried to help, but Susan pushed him away with the sole of her boot. The man stood back with a red face.

*Don't make em mad, Susan, Sheemie thought. Oh gods, don't do that, they'll hit ye some more! Oh, yer poor face! And ye got a nosebleed, so you do!*

"Last chance," Jonas told her. "Where are they, and what do they mean to do?"

"Go to hell," she said.

He smiled—a thin, hurty smile. "Likely I'll find you there when I ar-rive," he said.

Then, to the other Coffin Hunter: "You checked the place careful?"

"Whatever they had, they took it," the redhead answered. "Only thing they left was Dearborn's punch-bunny."

That made Jonas laugh meany-mean as he climbed on board his own horse.

"Come on," he said, "let's ride."

They went back into the Bad Grass. It closed around them, and it was as if they had never been there . . . except that Susan was gone, and so was Capi. The big rancher riding beside Susan had been leading the mule.

When he was sure they weren't going to return, Sheemie walked slowly back into the clearing, doing up the button on top of his pants as he came. He looked from the way Roland and his friends had gone to the one in which Susan had been taken. Which?

A moment's thought made him realize there was no choice. The grass out here was tough and springy. The path Roland and Alain and good old Arthur Heath (so Sheemie still thought of him, and always would) had taken was gone. The one made by Susan and her captors, on the other hand, was still clear. And perhaps, if he followed her, he could do some-thing for her. Help her.

Walking at first, then jogging as his fear that they might double back and catch him dissipated, Sheemie went in the direction Susan had been taken. He would follow her most of that day.

### 13

Cuthbert—not the most sanguine of personalities in any situation—grew more and more impatient as the day brightened toward true dawn. *It's Reaping*, he thought. *Finally Reaping, and here we sit with our knives sharpened and not a thing in the world to cut.*

Twice he asked Alain what he "heard." The first time Alain only grunted. The second time he asked what Bert *expected* him to hear, with someone yapping away in his ear like that.

Cuthbert, who did not consider two enquiries fifteen minutes apart as "yapping away," wandered off and sat morosely in front of his horse. After a bit, Roland came over and sat down beside him.

"Waiting," Cuthbert said. "That's what most of our time in Mejis has been about, and it's the thing I do worst."

"You won't have to do it much longer," Roland said.

### 14

Jonas's company reached the place where Fran Lengyll's party had made a temporary camp about an hour after the sun had topped the horizon. Quint, Rhea, and Renfrew's *vaqs* were already there and drinking coffee, Jonas was glad to see. Lengyll started forward, saw Susan riding with her hands tied, and actually drew back a step, as if he wanted to find a comer to hide in. There were no comers out here, however, so he stood fast. He did not look happy about it, however.

Susan nudged her horse forward with her knees, and when Reynolds tried to grab her shoulder, she dipped it to the side, temporarily eluding him.

"Why, Francis Lengyll! Imagine meeting you here!"

"Susan, I'm sorry to see ye so," Lengyll said. His flush crept closer and closer to his brow, like a tide approaching a seawall. "It's bad company ye've fallen in with, girl . . . and in the end, bad company always leaves ye to face the music

alone."

Susan actually laughed. "Bad company!" she said. "Aye, ye'd know about that, wouldn't ye, Fran?"

He turned, awkward and stiff in his embarrassment. She raised one booted foot and, before anyone could stop her, kicked him squarely between the shoulderblades. He went down on his stomach, his whole face widening in shocked surprise.

"No ye don't, ye bold cunt!" Renfrew shouted, and fetched her a wal-lop to the side of the head—it was on the left, and at least evened things up a bit, she would think later when her mind cleared and she was capable of thinking. She swayed in the saddle, but kept her seat. And she never looked at Renfrew, only at Lengyll, who had now managed to get to his hands and knees. He wore a deeply dazed expression.

"*You killed my father!*" she screamed at him. "*You killed my father, you cowardly, sneaking excuse for a man!*" She looked at the party of ranchers and vaqs, all of them staring at her now. "*There he is, Fran Lengyll, head of the Horsemen's Association, as low a sneak as ever walked! Low as coyote shit! Low as—*"

"That's enough," Jonas said, watching with some interest as Lengyll scuttled back to his men—and yes, Susan was bitterly delighted to see, it was a full-fledged scuttle—with his shoulders hunched. Rhea was cack-ling, rocking from side to side and making a sound like fingernails on a piece of slate. The sound shocked Susan, but she wasn't a bit surprised by Rhea's presence in this company.

"It could never be enough," she said, looking from Jonas to Lengyll with an expression of contempt so deep it seemed bottomless. "For him it could never be enough."

"Well, perhaps, but you did quite well in the time you had, lady-sai. Few could have done better. And listen to the witch cackle! Like salt in his wounds, I wot . . . but we'll shut her up soon enough." Then, turning his head: "Clay!"

Reynolds rode up.

"Think you can get Sunbeam back to Seafront all right?"

"I think so." Reynolds tried not to show the relief he felt at being sent back east instead of west. He had begun to have a bad feeling about Hang-ing Rock, Latigo, the tankers . . . about the whole show, really. God knew why. "Now?"

"Give it another minute," Jonas said. "Mayhap there's going to be a spot of killing

right here. Who knows? But it's the unanswered questions that makes it worthwhile getting up in the morning, even when a man's leg aches like a tooth with a hole in it. Wouldn't you say so?"

"I don't know, Eldred."

"Sai Renfrew, watch our pretty Sunbeam a minute. I have a piece of property to take back."

His voice carried well—he had meant that it should—and Rhea's cackles cut off suddenly, as if severed out of her throat with a hooking-knife. Smiling, Jonas walked his horse toward the black cart with its jost-ling show of gold symbols. Reynolds rode on his left, and Jonas sensed rather than saw Depape fall in on his right. Roy was a good enough boy, really; his head was a little soft, but his heart was in the right place, and you didn't have to tell him *everything*.

For every step forward Jonas's horse took, Rhea shrank back a little in the cart. Her eyes shifted from side to side in their deep sockets, look-ing for a way out that wasn't there.

"Keep away from me, ye charry man!" she cried, raising a hand toward him. With the other she clutched the sack with the ball in it ever more tightly. "Keep away, or I'll bring the lightning and strike ye dead where ye sit yer horse! Yer harrier friends, too!"

Jonas thought Roy hesitated briefly at that, but Clay never did, nor did Jonas himself. He guessed there was a great lot she could do ... or that there had been, at one time. But that was before the hungry glass had en-tered her life.

"Give it up to me," he said. He reached the side of her wagon and held his hand out for the bag. "It's not yours and never was. One day you'll doubtless have the Good Man's thanks for keeping it so well as you have, but now you must give it up."

She screamed—a sound of such piercing intensity that several of the *vaqueros* dropped their tin coffee-cups and clapped their hands over their ears. At the same time she knotted her hand through the drawstring and raised the bag over her head. The curved shape of the ball swung back and forth at the bottom of it like a pendulum.

"*I'll not!*" she howled. "*I'll smash it on the ground before I give it up to the likes o' you!*"

Jonas doubted if the ball would break, not hurled by her weak arms onto the



trampled, springy mat of the Bad Grass, but he didn't think he would have occasion to find out, one way or the other.

"Clay," he said. "Draw your gun."

He didn't need to look at Clay to see that he'd done it; he saw the frantic way her eyes shifted to the left, where Clay sat his horse.

"I'm going to have a count," Jonas said. "Just a short one; if I get to three and she hasn't passed that bag over, blow her ugly head off."

"Aye."

"One," Jonas said, watching the ball pendulum back and forth at the bottom of the upheld bag. It was glowing; he could see dull pink even through the cloth. "Two. Enjoy hell, Rhea, goodbye. Thr—"

*"Here!"* she screamed, thrusting it out toward him and shielding her face with the crooked hook of her free hand. *"Here, take it! And may it damn you the way it's damned me!"*

"Thankee-sai."

He grabbed the bag just below the draw top and yanked. Rhea screamed again as the string skinned her knuckles and tore off one of her nails. Jonas hardly heard. His mind was a white explosion of exultation. For the first time in his long professional life he forgot his job, his surroundings, and the six thousand things that could get him killed on any day. He had it; he had it; by all the graves of all the gods, he had the fuck-ing thing!

*Mine!* he thought, and that was all. He somehow restrained the urge to open the bag and stick his head inside it, like a horse sticking its head into a bag of oats, and looped the drawstring over the pommel of his saddle twice instead. He took in a breath as deep as his lungs would allow, then expelled it. Better. A little.

"Roy."

"Aye, Jonas."

It would be good to get out of this place, Jonas thought, and not for the first time. To get away from these hicks. He was sick of *aye* and *ye* and *so it is*, sick to his bones.

"Roy, we'll give the bitch a ten-count this time. If she isn't out of my sight by then, you have my permission to blow her ass off. Now, let's see if you can do the counting. I'll be listening close, so mind you don't skip any!"

"One," Depape said eagerly. "Two. Three. Four."

Spitting curses, Rhea snatched up the reins of the cart and spanked the pony's back with them. The pony laid its ears back and jerked the cart forward so vigorously that Rhea went tumbling backward off the cant-board, her feet up, her white and bony shins showing above her ankle-high black shoes and mismatched wool stockings. The *vaqueros* laughed. Jonas laughed himself. It was pretty funny, all right, seeing her on her back with her pins in the air.

"Fuh-fuh-five," Depape said, laughing so hard he was hiccupping. "Sih-sih-six!" Rhea climbed back up, flopped onto the cantboard again with all the grace of a dying fish, and peered around at them, wall-eyed and sneering.

"*I curse ye all!*" she screamed. It cut through them, stilling their laughter even as the cart bounced toward the edge of the trampled clear-ing. "*Every last one of ye! Ye... and ye... and ye!*" Her crooked finger pointed last at Jonas. "*Thief! Miserable thief!*"

*As though it was yours*, Jonas marveled (although "Mine!" was the first word to occur to him, once he had taken possession of it). *As though such a wonder could ever belong to a back-country reader of rooster-guts such as you.*

The cart bounced its way into the Bad Grass, the pony pulling hard with its ears laid back; the old woman's screams served to drive it better than any whip could have done. The black slipped into the green. They saw the cart flicker like a conjurer's trick, and then it was gone. For a long time yet, however, they heard her shrieking her curses, calling death down upon them beneath the Demon Moon.

## 15

"Go on," Jonas told Clay Reynolds. "Take our Sunbeam back. And if you want to stop on the way and make some use of her, why, be my guest." He glanced at Susan as he said this, to see what effect it might be having, but he was disappointed—she looked dazed, as if the last blow Renfrew had dealt her had scrambled her brains, at least temporarily. "Just make sure she gets to Coral at the end of all the fun." "I will. Any message for sai Thorin?"

"Tell her to keep the wench someplace safe until she hears from me. And . . . why don't you stay with her. Clay? Coral, I mean—come tomor-row, I don't think we'll have to worry about this 'un anymore, but Coral . . . ride with her to Ritzy when she goes. Be her escort, like."

Reynolds nodded. Better and better. Seafront it would be, and that was fine. He might like a little taste of the girl once he got her there, but not on the way. Not under the ghostly-full daytime Demon Moon. "Go on, then. Get started."

Reynolds led her across the clearing, aiming for a point well away from the bent swath of grass where Rhea had made her exit. Susan rode silently, downcast eyes fixed on her bound wrists.

Jonas turned to face his men. "The three young fellows from In-World have broken their way out of jail, with that haughty young bitch's help," he said, pointing at Susan's departing back.

There was a low, growling murmur from the men. That "Will Dear-born" and his friends were free they had known; that sai Delgado had helped them escape they had not . . . and it was perhaps just as well for her that Reynolds was at that moment leading her into the Bad Grass and out of sight.

"Never mind!" Jonas shouted, pulling their attention back to him. He reached out a stealthy hand and caressed the curve at the bottom of the drawstring bag. Just touching the ball made him feel as if he could do anything, and with one hand tied behind his back, at that.

"Never mind her, and never mind them!" His eyes moved from Lengyll to Wertner to Croydon to Brian Hookey to Roy Depape. "We're close to forty men, going to join another hundred and fifty. They're three, and not one a day over sixteen. Are you afraid of three little boys?"

"*No!*" they cried.

"If we run on em, my cullies, what will we do?"

"*KILL THEM!*" The shout so loud that it sent rooks rising up into the morning sun, cawing their displeasure as they commenced the hunt for more peaceful surroundings.

Jonas was satisfied. His hand was still on the sweet curve of the ball, and he could feel it pouring strength into him. *Pink strength*, he thought, and grinned.

"Come on, boys. I want those tankers in the woods west of Eyebolt before the home folks light their Reap-Night Bonfire."

Sheemie, crouched down in the grass and peering into the clearing, was nearly run

over by Rhea's black wagon; the screaming, gibbering witch passed so close to him that he could smell her sour skin and dirty hair. If she had looked down, she couldn't have missed seeing him and undoubt-edly would have turned him into a bird or a bumbler or maybe even a mosquito.

The boy saw Jonas pass custody of Susan to the one in the cloak, and began working his way around the edge of the clearing. He heard Jonas haranguing the men (many of whom Sheemie knew; it shamed him to know how many Mejis cowboys were doing that bad Coffin Hunter's bid-ding), but paid no attention to what he was saying. Sheemie froze in place as they mounted up, momentarily scared they would come in his direc-tion, but they rode the other way, west. The clearing emptied almost as if by magic . . . except it wasn't *entirely* empty.

Caprichoso had been left behind, his lead trailing on the beaten grass. Capi looked after the depart-ing riders, brayed once—as if to tell them they could all go to hell—then turned and made eye-contact with Sheemie, who was peering out into the clearing. The mule flicked his ears at the boy, then tried to graze. He lipped the Bad Grass a single time, raised his head, and brayed at Sheemie, as if to say this was all the inn-boy's fault.

Sheemie stared thoughtfully at Caprichoso, thinking of how much easier it was to ride than to walk. Gods, yes ... but that second bray de-cided him against it. The mule might give one of his disgusted cries at the wrong time and alert the man who had Susan.

"You'll find your way home, I reckon," Sheemie said. "So long, pal. So long, good old Capi. See you farther down the path."

He found the path made by Susan and Reynolds, and began to trot af-ter them once more.

## 17

"They're coming again," Alain said a moment before Roland sensed it himself—a brief flicker in his head like pink lightning. "All of them."

Roland hunkered in front of Cuthbert. Cuthbert looked back at him without even a suggestion of his usual foolish good humor.

"Much of it's on you," Roland said, then tapped the slingshot. "And on that."

"I know."

"How much have you got in the armory?"

"Almost four dozen steel balls." Bert held up a cotton bag which had, in more settled times, held his father's tobacco. "Plus assorted fireworks in my saddlebag."

"How many big-bangers?"

"Enough, Roland." Unsmiling. With the laughter gone from them, he had the hollow eyes of just one more killer. "Enough."

Roland ran a hand down the front of the *serape* he wore, letting his palm reacquaint itself with the rough weave. He looked at Cuthbert's, then at Alain's, telling himself again that it could work, yes, as long as they held their nerve and didn't let themselves think of it in terms of three against forty or fifty, it could work.

"The ones out at Hanging Rock will hear the shooting once it starts, won't they?" Al asked.

Roland nodded. "With the wind blowing from us to them, there's no doubt of that."

"We'll have to move fast, then."

"We'll go as best we can." Roland thought of standing between the tangled green hedges behind the Great Hall, David the hawk on his arm and a sweat of terror trickling down his back. *I think you die today*, he had told the hawk, and he had told it true. Yet he himself had lived, and passed his test, and walked out of the testing corridor facing east. Today it was Cuthbert and Alain's turn to be tested—not in Gilead, in the traditional place of proving behind the Great Hall, but here in Mejis, on the edge of the Bad Grass, in the desert, and in the canyon. Eyebolt Canyon.

"Prove or die," Alain said, as if reading the run of the gunslinger's thoughts.

"That's what it comes down to."

"Yes. That's what it always comes down to, in the end. How long before they get here, do you think?"

"An hour at least, I'd say. Likely two."

"They'll be running a 'watch-and-go.' "

Alain nodded. "I think so, yes."

"That's not good," Cuthbert said.

"Jonas is afraid of being ambushed in the grass," Roland said. "Maybe of us setting fire to it around him. They'll loosen up when they get into the clear."

"You hope," Cuthbert said.

Roland nodded gravely. "Yes. I hope."

## 18

At first Reynolds was content to lead the girl along the broken backtrail at a fast walk, but about thirty minutes after leaving Jonas, Lengyll, and the rest, he broke into a trot. Pylon matched Reynolds's horse easily, and just as easily when, ten minutes later, he upped their speed to a light but steady run.

Susan held to the horn of her saddle with her bound hands and rode easily at Reynolds's right, her hair streaming out behind her. She thought her face must be quite colorful; the skin of her cheeks felt raised at least two inches higher than usual, welted and tender. Even the passing wind stung a little.

At the place where the Bad Grass gave way to the Drop, Reynolds stopped to give the horses a blow. He dismounted himself, turned his back to her, and took a piss. As he did, Susan looked up along the rise of land and saw the great herd, now untended and unravelling at the edges. They had done that much, perhaps. It wasn't much, but it was something.

"Do you need to do the necessary?" Reynolds asked. "I'll help you down if you do, but don't say no now and whine about it later."

"Ye're afraid. Big brave regulator that ye are, ye're scared, ain't ye? Aye, coffin tattoo and all."

Reynolds tried a contemptuous grin. It didn't fit his face very well this morning.

"You ort to leave the fortune-telling to those that are good at it, missy. Now do you need a necessary stop or not?"

"No. And ye *are* afraid. Of what?"

Reynolds, who only knew that his bad feeling hadn't left him when he left Jonas, as he'd hoped it would, bared his tobacco-stained teeth at her. "If you can't talk sensible, just shut up."

"Why don't ye let me go? Perhaps my friends will do the same for you, when they catch us up."

This time Reynolds grunted laughter which was almost genuine. He swung himself into his saddle, hawked, spat. Overhead, Demon Moon was a pale and bloated ball in the sky. "You can dream, miss'sai," he said, "dreaming's free. But you ain't never going to see those three again. They're for the worms, they are."

Now let's ride."

They rode.

## 19

Cordelia hadn't gone to bed at all on Reaping Eve. She sat the night through in her parlor chair, and although there was sewing on her lap, she had put not a single stitch in nor picked one out. Now, as morning's light brightened toward ten o' the clock, she sat in the same chair, looking out at nothing. What was there to look at, anyway? Everything had come down with a smash—all her hopes of the fortune Thorin would settle on Susan and Susan's child, perhaps while he still lived, certainly in his dead-letter; all her hopes of ascending to her proper place in the community; all her plans for the future. Swept away by two wilful young people who couldn't keep their pants up.

She sat in her old chair with her knitting on her lap and the ashes Susan had smeared on her cheek standing out like a brand, and thought:

*They'll find me dead in this chair, someday—old, poor, and forgotten. That ungrateful child! After all I did for her!*

What roused her was a weak scratching at the window. She had no idea how long it had been going on before it finally intruded on her consciousness, but when it did, she laid her needlework aside and got up to see. A bird, perhaps. Or children playing Reaping jokes, unaware that the world had come to an end. Whatever it was, she would shoo it away.

Cordelia saw nothing at first. Then, as she was about to turn away, she spied a pony and cart at the edge of the yard. The cart was a little disquieting—black, with gold symbols overpainted—and the pony in the shafts stood with its head lowered, not grazing, looking as if it had been run half to death.

She was still frowning out at this when a twisted, filthy hand rose in the air directly in front of her and began to scratch at the glass again. Cordelia gasped and clapped both hands to her bosom as her heart took a startled leap in her chest. She backed up a step, and gave a little shriek as her calf brushed the tender of the stove.

The long, dirty nails scratched twice more, then fell away.

Cordelia stood where she was for a moment, irresolute, then went to the door,

stopping at the woodbox to pick up a chunk of ash which fitted her hand. Just in case. Then she jerked the door open, went to the corner of the house, drew in a deep, steadying breath, and went around to the garden side, raising the ash-chunk as she did.

"Get out, whoever ye are! Scat before I—"

Her voice was stilled by what she saw: an incredibly old woman crawling through the frost-killed flowerbed next to the house—crawling toward her. The crone's stringy white hair (what remained of it) hung in her face. Sores festered on her cheeks and brow; her lips had split and drizzled blood down her pointed, warty chin. The corneas of her eyes had gone a filthy gray-yellow, and she panted like a cracked bellows as she moved.

"Good woman, help me," this specter gasped. "Help me if ye will, for I'm about done up."

The hand holding the chunk of ash sagged. Cordelia could hardly believe what she was seeing. "Rhea?" she whispered. "Is it Rhea?"

"Aye," Rhea whispered, crawling relentlessly through the dead silk-flowers, dragging her hands through the cold earth. "Help me."

Cordelia retreated a step, her makeshift bludgeon now hanging at her knee. "No, I... I can't have such as thee in my house ... I'm sorry to see ye so, but . . . but I have a reputation, ye ken . . . folk watch me close, so they do ..."

She glanced at the High Street as she said this, as if expecting to see a line of townspeople outside her gate, watching eagerly, avid to fleet their wretched gossip on its lying way, but there was no one there. Hambry was quiet, its walks and byways empty, the customary joyous noise of Reap-ing Fair-Day stilled. She looked back at the thing which had fetched up in her dead flowers.

"Yer niece ... did this . . ." the thing in the dirt whispered. "All . . . her fault . . ."

Cordelia dropped the chunk of wood. It clipped the side of her ankle, but she hardly noticed. Her hands curled into fists before her.

"Help me," Rhea whispered. "I know ... where she is ... we ... we have work, us two ... women's . . . work ..."

Cordelia hesitated a moment, then went to the woman, knelt, got an arm around her, and somehow got her to her feet. The smell coming off her was reeky and nauseating—the smell of decomposing flesh.

Bony fingers caressed Cordelia's cheek and the side of her neck as she helped the



hag into the house. Cordelia's flesh crawled, but she didn't pull away until Rhea collapsed into a chair, gasping from one end and farting from the other.

"Listen to me," the old woman hissed.

"I am." Cordelia drew a chair over and sat beside her. At death's door she might be, but once her eye fell on you, it was strangely hard to look away. Now Rhea's fingers dipped inside the bodice of her dirty dress, brought out a silver charm of some kind, and began to move it back and forth rapidly, as if telling beads.

Cordelia, who hadn't felt sleepy all night, began to feel that way now.

"The others are beyond us," Rhea said, "and the ball has slipped my grasp. But *she*—! Back to Mayor's House she's been ta'en, and mayhap we could see to her—we could do that much, aye."

"You can't see to anything," Cordelia said distantly. "You're dying."

Rhea wheezed laughter and a trickle of yellowish drool. "Dying? Nay! Just done up and in need of a refreshment. Now listen to me, Cordelia daughter of Hiram and sister of Pat!"

She hooked a bony (and surprisingly strong) arm around Cordelia's neck and drew her close. At the same time she raised her other hand, twirling the silver medallion in front of Cordelia's wide eyes. The crone whispered, and after a bit Cordelia began to nod her understanding.

"Do it, then," the old woman said, letting go. She slumped back in her chair, exhausted. "Now, for I can't last much longer as I am. And I'll need a bit o' time after, mind ye. To revive, like."

Cordelia moved across the room to the kitchen area. There, on the counter beside the hand-pump, was a wooden block in which were sheathed the two sharp knives of the house. She took one and came back. Her eyes were distant and far, as Susan's had been when she and Rhea stood in the open doorway of Rhea's hut in the light of the Kissing Moon.

"Would ye pay her back?" Rhea asked. "For that's why I've come to ye."

"Miss Oh So Young and Pretty," Cordelia murmured in a barely audi-ble voice.

The hand not holding the knife floated up to her face and touched her ash-smearred cheek. "Yes. I'd be repaid of her, so I would."

"To the death?"

"Aye. Hers or mine."

" 'Twill be hers," Rhea said, "never fear it. Now refresh me, Cordelia. Give me

what I need!"

Cordelia unbuttoned her dress down the front, pushing it open to re-veal an ungenerous bosom and a middle which had begun to curve out in the last year or so, making a tidy little potbelly. Yet she still had the ves-tige of a waist, and it was here she used the knife, cutting through her shift and the top layers of flesh beneath. The white cotton began to bloom red at once along the slit.

"Aye," Rhea whispered. "Like roses. I dream of them often enough, roses in bloom, and what stands black among em at the end of the world. Come closer!" She put her hand on the small of Cordelia's back, urging her forward. She raised her eyes to Cordelia's face, then grinned and licked her lips. "Good. Good enough."

Cordelia looked blankly over the top of the old woman's head as Rhea of the Coos buried her face against the red cut in the shift and began to drink.

## 20

Roland was at first pleased as the muted jingle of harness and buckle drew closer to the place where the three of them were hunkered down in the high grass, but as the sounds drew closer still—close enough to hear mur-muring voices as well as soft-thudding hooves—he began to be afraid. For the riders to pass close was one thing, but if they were, through foul luck, to come right upon them, the three boys would likely die like a nest of moles uncovered by the blade of a passing plow. *Ka* surely hadn't brought them all this way to end in such fashion, had it? In all these miles of Bad Grass, how could that party of oncoming rid-ers possibly strike the one point where Roland and his friends had pulled up? But still they closed in, the sound of tack and buckle and men's voices growing ever sharper.

Alain looked at Roland with dismayed eyes and pointed to the left. Roland shook his head and patted his hands toward the ground, indicating they would stay put. They *had* to stay put; it was too late to move without being heard.

Roland drew his guns.

Cuthbert and Alain did the same.

In the end, the plow missed the moles by sixty feet. The boys could actually see the horses and riders flashing through the thick grass; Roland easily made out that the party was led by Jonas, Depape, and Lengyll, rid-ing three abreast. They were

followed by at least three dozen others, glimpsed as roan flashes and the bright red and green of *serapes* through the grass. They were strung out pretty well, and Roland thought he and his friends could reasonably hope they'd string out even more once they reached open desert.

The boys waited for the party to pass, holding their horses' heads in case one of them took it in mind to whicker a greeting to the nags so close by. When they were gone, Roland turned his pale and unsmiling face to his friends.

"Mount up," he said. "Reaping's come."

## 21

They walked their horses to the edge of the Bad Grass, meeting the path of Jonas's party where the grass gave way first to a zone of stunted bushes and then to the desert itself.

The wind howled high and lonesome, carrying big drifts of gritty dust under a cloudless dark blue sky. Demon Moon stared down from it like the filmed eye of a corpse. Two hundred yards ahead, the drogue riders backing Jonas's party were spread out in a line of three, their *sombreros* jammed down tight on their heads, their shoulders hunched, their *scrapes* blowing.

Roland moved so that Cuthbert rode in the middle of their trio. Bert had his slingshot in his hand. Now he handed Alain half a dozen steel balls, and Roland another half-dozen. Then he raised his eyebrows questioningly. Roland nodded and they began to ride.

Dust blew past them in rattling sheets, sometimes turning the drogue riders into ghosts, sometimes obscuring them completely, but the boys closed in steadily. Roland rode tense, waiting for one of the drogues to turn in his saddle and see them, but none did—none of them wanted to put his face into that cutting, grit-filled wind. Nor was there sound to warn them; there was sandy hardpack under the horses' hooves now, and it didn't give away much.

When they were just twenty yards behind the drogues, Cuthbert nodded—they were close enough for him to work. Alain handed him a ball. Bert, sitting ramrod straight in the saddle, dropped it into the cup of his slingshot, pulled, waited for the wind to drop, then released. The rider ahead on the left jerked as if stung, raised one hand a little, then toppled out of his saddle. Incredibly, neither of his

two *companeros* seemed to no-tice. Roland saw what he thought was the beginning of a reaction from the one on the right when Bert drew again, and the rider in the middle col-lapsed forward onto his horse's neck. The horse, startled, reared up. The rider flopped bonelessly backward, his *sombrero* tumbling off, and fell. The wind dropped enough for Roland to hear his knee snap as his foot caught in one of his stirrups.

The third rider now began to turn. Roland caught a glimpse of a bearded face—a dangling cigarette, unlit because of the wind, one aston-ished eye—and then Cuthbert's sling *thumped* again. The astonished eye was replaced by a red socket. The rider slid from his saddle, groping for the horn and missing it.

*Three gone*, Roland thought.

He kicked Rusher into a gallop. The others did the same, and the boys rode forward into the dust a stirrup's width apart. The horses of the am-bushed drogue riders veered off to the south in a group, and that was good. Riderless horses ordinarily didn't raise eyebrows in Mejis, but when they were saddled— More riders up ahead: a single, then two side by side, then another single. Roland drew his knife, and rode up beside the fellow who was now drogue and didn't know it.

"What news?" he asked conversationally, and when the man turned, Roland buried his knife in his chest. The *vaq's* brown eyes widened above the bandanna he'd pulled up outlaw-style over his mouth and nose, and then he tumbled from his saddle.

Cuthbert and Alain spurred past him, and Bert, not slowing, took the two riding ahead with his slingshot. The fellow beyond them heard some-thing in spite of the wind, and swivelled in his saddle. Alain had drawn his own knife and now held it by the tip of the blade. He threw hard, in the exaggerated full-arm motion they had been taught, and although the range was long for such work—twenty feet at least, and in windy air—his aim was true. The hilt came to rest protruding from the center of the man's bandanna. The *vaq* groped for it, making choked gargling sounds around the knife in his throat, and then he too dropped from the saddle. Seven now.

*Like the story of the shoemaker and the flies*, Roland thought. His heart was beating slow and hard in his chest as he caught up with Alain and Cuthbert. The wind gusted a lonely whine. Dust flew, swirled, then dropped with the wind.

Ahead of them were three more riders, and ahead of them the main party. Roland pointed at the next three, then mimed the slingshot. Pointed beyond them and mimed firing a revolver. Cuthbert and Alain nodded. They rode forward, once again stirrup-to-stirrup, closing in.

## 22

Bert got two of the three ahead of them clean, but the third jerked at the wrong moment, and the steel ball meant for the back of his head only clipped his earlobe on the way by. Roland had drawn his gun by then, however, and put a bullet in the man's temple as he turned. That made ten, a full quarter of Jonas's company before the riders even realized trouble had begun. Roland had no idea if it would be enough of an advantage, but he knew that the first part of the job was done. No more stealth; now it was a matter of raw killing.

*"Hile! Hile!"* he screamed in a ringing, carrying voice. *"To me, gunslingers! To me! Ride them down! No prisoners!"*

They spurred toward the main party, riding into battle for the first time, closing like wolves on sheep, shooting before the men ahead of them had any slight idea of who had gotten in behind them or what was happening. The three boys had been trained as gunslingers, and what they lacked in experience they made up for with the keen eyes and reflexes of the young. Under their guns, the desert east of Hanging Rock became a killing-floor.

Screaming, not a single thought among them above the wrists of their deadly hands, they sliced into the unprepared Mejis party like a three-sided blade, shooting as they went. Not every shot killed, but not a one went entirely wild, either. Men flew out of their saddles and were dragged by boots caught in stirrups as their horses bolted; other men, some dead, some only wounded, were trampled beneath the feet of their panicky, rearing mounts.

Roland rode with both guns drawn and tiring, Rusher's reins gripped in his teeth so they wouldn't fall overside and trip the horse up. Two men dropped beneath his fire on his left, two more on the right. Ahead of them, Brian Hookey turned in his saddle, his beard-stubby face long with amazement. Around his neck, a reap-charm in the shape of a bell swung and tinkled as he grabbed for the shotgun which hung in a scabbard over one burly blacksmith's shoulder. Before he could

do more than get a hand on the gunstock, Roland blew the silver bell off his chest and exploded the heart which lay beneath it. Hookey pitched out of his saddle with a grunt.

Cuthbert caught up with Roland on the right side and shot two more men off their horses. He gave Roland a fierce and blazing grin. "*Al was right!*" he shouted. "*These are hard calibers!*"

Roland's talented fingers did their work, rolling the cylinders of the guns he held and reloading at a full gallop—doing it with a ghastly, super-natural speed—and then beginning to fire again. Now they had come almost all the way through the group, riding hard, laying men low on both sides and straight ahead as well. Alain dropped back a little and turned his horse, covering Roland and Cuthbert from behind.

Roland saw Jonas, Depape, and Lengyll reining around to face their attackers. Lengyll was clawing at his machine-gun, but the strap had gotten tangled in the wide collar of the duster he wore, and every time he grabbed for the stock, it bobbed out of his reach. Beneath his heavy gray-blond mustache, Lengyll's mouth was twisted with fury.

Now, riding between Roland and Cuthbert and these three, holding a huge blued-steel five-shot in one hand, came Hash Renfrew.

"Gods damn you!" Renfrew cried. "Oh, you rotten sister-fuckers!" He dropped his reins and laid the five-shot in the crook of one elbow to steady it. The wind gusted viciously, wrapping him in an envelope of swirling brown grit.

Roland had no thought of retreating, or perhaps jiggling to one side or the other. He had, in fact, no thoughts at all. The fever had descended over his mind and he burned with it like a torch inside a glass sleeve. Screaming through the reins caught in his teeth, he galloped toward Hash Renfrew and the three men behind him.

## 23

Jonas had no clear idea of what was happening until he heard Will Dear-born screaming

*(Hile! To me! No prisoners!)*

a battle-cry he knew of old. Then it fell into place and the rattle of gunfire made

sense. He reined around, aware of Roy doing the same be-side him . . . but most aware of the ball in its bag, a thing both powerful and fragile, swinging back and forth against the neck of his horse.

"It's those *kids!*" Roy exclaimed. His total surprise made him look more stupid than ever.

"*Dearborn, you bastard!*" Hash Renfrew spat, and the gun in his hand thundered a single time.

Jonas saw Dearborn's sombrero rise from his head, its brim chewed away. Then the kid was firing, and he was good—better than anyone Jonas had ever seen in his life. Renfrew was hammered back out of his saddle with both legs kicking, still holding onto his monster gun, firing it twice at the dusty-blue sky before hitting the ground on his back and rolling, dead, on his side.

Lengyll's hand dropped away from the elusive wire stock of his speed-shooter and he only stared, unable to believe the apparition bearing down on him out of the dust. "Get back!" he cried. "In the name of the Horsemen's Association, I tell you—" Then a large black hole appeared in the center of his forehead, just above the place where his eyebrows tangled together. His hands flew up to his shoulders, palms out, as if he were declaring surrender. That was how he died.

"Son of a bitch, oh you little sister-fucking son of a bitch!" Depape howled. He tried to draw and his revolver got caught in his *scrape*. He was still trying to pull it free when a bullet from Roland's gun opened his mouth in a red scream almost all the way down to his adam's apple.

*This can't be happening*, Jonas thought stupidly. *It can't, there are too many of us.* But it *was* happening. The In-World boys had struck unerringly at the fracture-line; were performing what amounted to a textbook example of how gunslingers were supposed to attack when the odds were bad. And Jonas's coalition of ranchers, cowboys, and town tough-boys had shat-tered. Those not dead were fleeing to every point of the compass, spurring their horses as if a hundred devils paroled from hell were in pursuit. They were far from a hundred, but they *fought* like a hundred. Bodies were scattered in the dust everywhere, and as Jonas watched, he saw the one serving as their back door—Stockworth—ride down another man, bump him out of his saddle, and put a bullet in his head as he fell. *Gods of the earth*, he thought, *that was Croydon, him that owns the Piano Ranch!* Except he didn't own it anymore.

And now Dearborn was bearing down on Jonas with his gun drawn. Jonas snatched the drawstring looped around the horn of his saddle and unwound it with two fast, hard snaps of the wrist. He held the bag up in the windy air, his teeth bared and his long white hair streaming.

*"Come any closer and I'll smash it! I mean it, you damned puppy! Stay where you are!"*

Roland never hesitated in his headlong gallop, never paused to think; his hands did his thinking for him now, and when he remembered all this later, it was distant and silent and queerly warped, like something seen in a flawed mirror ... or a wizard's glass.

Jonas thought: *Gods, it's him! It's Arthur Eld himself come to take me!*

And as the barrel of Roland's gun opened in his eye like the entrance to a tunnel or a mineshaft, Jonas remembered what the brat had said to him in the dusty dooryard of that burned-out ranch: *The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west.*

*I knew, Jonas thought. Even then I knew my ka had pretty well run out. But surely he won't risk the ball . . . he can't risk the ball, he's the dinh of this ka-tet and he can't risk it...*

*"To me!"* Jonas screamed. *"To me, boys! They're only three, for gods' sake! To me, you cowards!"*

But he was alone—Lengyll killed with his idiotic machine-gun lying by his side, Roy a corpse glaring up at the bitter sky, Quint fled, Hookey dead, the ranchers who had ridden with them gone. Only Clay still lived, and he was miles from here. *"I'll smash it!"* he shrieked at the cold-eyed boy bearing down on him like death's sleekest engine. *"Before all the gods, I'll—"*

Roland thumbed back the hammer of his revolver and fired. The bullet struck the center of the tattooed hand holding the drawstring cord and vaporized the palm, leaving only fingers that twitched their random way out of a spongy red mass. For just a moment Roland saw the blue coffin, and then it was covered by downspilling blood.

The bag dropped. And, as Rusher collided with Jonas's horse and slewed it to the side. Roland caught the bag deftly in the crook of one arm. Jonas, screaming in dismay as the prize left him, grabbed at Roland, caught his shoulder, and almost succeeded in turning the gunslinger out of his saddle. Jonas's blood rained across



Roland's face in hot drops.

"Give it back, you brat!" Jonas clawed under his *serape* and brought out another gun. "Give it back, it's mine!"

"Not anymore," Roland said. And, as Rusher danced around, quick and delicate for such a large animal, Roland fired two point-blank rounds into Jonas's face. Jonas's horse bolted out from under him and the man with the white hair landed spreadeagled on his back with a thump. His arms and legs spasmed, jerked, trembled, then stilled.

Roland looped the bag's drawstring over his shoulder and rode back toward Alain and Cuthbert, ready to give aid ... but there was no need. They sat their horses side by side in the blowing dust, at the end of a scattered road of dead bodies, their eyes wide and dazed—eyes of boys who have passed through fire for the first time and can hardly believe they have not been burned. Only Alain had been wounded; a bullet had opened his left cheek, a wound that healed clean but left a scar he bore until his dying day. He could not remember who had shot him, he said later on, or at what point of the battle. He had been lost to himself during the shooting, and had only vague memories of what had happened after the charge began. Cuthbert said much the same.

"Roland," Cuthbert said now. He passed a shaky hand down his face. "Hile, gunslinger."

"Hile."

Cuthbert's eyes were red and irritated from the sand, as if he had been crying. He took back the unspent silver slingshot balls when Roland handed them to him without seeming to know what they were. "Roland, we're alive."

"Yes."

Alain was looking around dazedly. "Where did the others go?"

"I'd say at least twenty-five of them are back there," Roland said, gesturing at the road of dead bodies. "The rest—" He waved his hand, still with a revolver in it, in a wide half-circle. "They've gone. Had their fill of Mid-World's wars, I wot."

Roland slipped the drawstring bag off his shoulder, held it before him on the bridge of his saddle for a moment, and then opened it. For a moment the bag's mouth was black, and then it filled with the irregular pulse of a lovely pink light. It crept up the gunslinger's smooth cheeks like fingers and swam in his eyes.

"Roland," Cuthbert said, suddenly nervous, "I don't think you should play with

that. Especially not now. They'll have heard the shooting out at Hanging Rock. If we're going to finish what we started, we don't have time for—"

Roland ignored him. He slipped both hands into the bag and lifted the wizard's glass out. He held it up to his eyes, unaware that he had smeared it with droplets of Jonas's blood. The ball did not mind; this was not the first time it had been blood-touched. It flashed and swirled formlessly for a moment, and then its pink vapors opened like curtains. Roland saw what was there, and lost himself within it.

## CHAPTER X BENEATH THE DEMON MOON (II)

### 1

Coral's grip on Susan's arm was firm but not painful. There was nothing particularly cruel about the way she was moving Susan along the down-stairs corridor, but there was a relentlessness about it that was disheartening. Susan didn't try to protest; it would have been useless. Behind the two women were a pair of *vaqueros* (armed with knives and *bolas* rather than guns; the available guns had all gone west with Jonas). Behind the *vaqs*, skulking along like a sullen ghost

which lacks the necessary psychic energy to fully materialize itself, came the late Chancellor's older brother, Laslo. Reynolds, his taste for a spot of journey's-end rape blunted by his growing sense of disquiet, had either remained above or gone off to town.

"I'm going to put ye in the cold pantry until I know better what to do with'ee, dear," Coral said. "Ye'll be quite safe there ... and warm. How fortunate ye wore a *serape*. Then . . . when Jonas gets back ..."

"Ye'll never see sai Jonas again," Susan said. "He won't ever—"

Fresh pain exploded in her sensitive face. For a moment it seemed the entire world had blown up. Susan reeled back against the dressed stone wall of the lower corridor, her vision first blurred, then slowly clearing. She could feel blood flowing down her cheek from a wound opened by the stone in Coral's ring when Coral had backhanded her. And her nose. *That* cussed thing was bleeding again, too.

Coral was looking at her in a chilly this-is-all-business-to-me fashion, but Susan believed she saw something different in the woman's eyes. Fear, mayhap.

"Don't talk to me about Eldred, missy. He's sent to catch the boys who killed my brother. The boys *you* set loose."

"Get off it." Susan wiped her nose, grimaced at the blood pooled in her palm, and wiped it on the leg of her pants. "I know who killed Hart as well as ye do yerself, so don't pull mine and I won't yank yer own." She watched Coral's hand rise, ready to slap, and managed a dry laugh. "Go on. Cut my face open on the other side, if ye like. Will that change how ye sleep tonight with no man to warm the other side of the bed?"

Coral's hand came down fast and hard, but instead of slapping, it seized Susan's arm again. Hard enough to hurt, this time, but Susan barely felt it. She had been hurt by experts this day, and would suffer more hurt gladly, if that would hasten the moment when she and Roland could be together again.

Coral hauled her the rest of the way down the corridor, through the kitchen (that great room, which would have been all steam and bustle on any other Reaping Day, now stood uncannily deserted), and to the iron-bound door on the far side. This she opened. A smell of potatoes and gourds and sharproot drifted out.

"Get in there. Go smart, before I decide to kick yer winsome ass square."

Susan looked her in the eye, smiling.

"I'd damn ye for a murderer's bed-bitch, sai Thorin, but ye've already damned yerself. Ye know it, too—'tis written in yer face, to be sure. So I'll just drop ye a curtsey"—still smiling, she suited action to the words— "and wish ye a very good day."

"*Get in and shut up yer saucy mouth!*" Coral cried, and pushed Susan into the cold pantry. She slammed the door, ran the bolt, and turned her blazing eyes upon the *vaqs*, who stood prudently away from her.

"Keep her well, *muchachos*. Mind ye do."

She brushed between them, not listening to their assurances, and went up to her late brother's suite to wait for Jonas, or word of Jonas. The whey-faced bitch sitting down there amongst the carrots and potatoes knew nothing, but her words (*ye'll never see sai Jonas again*)

were in Coral's head now; they echoed and would not leave.

## 2

Twelve o' the clock sounded from the squat bell-tower atop the Town Gathering Hall. And if the unaccustomed silence which hung over the rest of Hambry seemed strange as that Reap morning passed into afternoon, the silence in the Travellers' Rest was downright eerie. Better than two hundred souls were packed together beneath the dead gaze of The Romp,, all of them drinking hard, yet there was hardly a sound among them save for the shuffle of feet and the impatient rap of glasses on the bar, indicat-ing that another drink was wanted.

Sheb had tried a hesitant tune on the piano—"Big Bottle Boogie," everyone liked that one—and a cowboy with a mutie-mark on one cheek had put the tip of a knife in his ear and told him to shut up that noise if he wanted to keep what passed for his brains on the starboard side of his eardrum. Sheb, who would be happy to go on drawing breath for another thousand years if the gods so allowed, quit his piano-bench at once, and went to the bar to help Stanley and Pettie the Trotter serve up the booze.

The mood of the drinkers was confused and sullen. Reaping Fair had been stolen from them, and they didn't know what to do about it. There would still be a bonfire, and plenty of stuffy-guys to bum on it, but there were no Reap-kisses today and would be no dancing tonight; no riddles, no races, no pig-wrestle, no

jokes ... no good cheer, dammit! No hearty farewell to the end of the year! Instead of joviality there had been murder in the dark, and the escape of the guilty, and now only the hope of retribution instead of the certainty of it. These folk, sullen-drunk and as potentially dangerous as stormclouds filled with lightning, wanted someone to focus on, someone to tell them what to do.

And, of course, someone to toss on the fire, as in the days of Eld.

It was at this point, not long after the last toll of noon had faded into the cold air, that the batwing doors opened and two women came in. A good many knew the crone in the lead, and several of them crossed their eyes with their thumbs as a ward against her evil look. A murmur ran through the room. It was the Coos, the old witch-woman, and although her face was pocked with sores and her eyes sunk so deep in their sockets they could barely be seen, she gave off a peculiar sense of vitality. Her lips were red, as if she had been eating winterberries.

The woman behind her walked slowly and stiffly, with one hand pressed against her midsection. Her face was as white as the witch-woman's mouth was red.

Rhea advanced to the middle of the floor, passing the gawking trail-hands at the Watch Me tables without so much as a glance. When she reached the center of the bar and stood directly beneath The Romp's glare, she turned to look at the silent drovers and townfolk.

"Most of ye know me!" she cried in a rusty voice which stopped just short of stridency. "Those of ye who don't have never wanted a love-potion or needed the ram put back in yer rod or gotten tired of a nagging mother-in-law's tongue. I'm Rhea, the wise-woman of the Coos, and this lady beside me is aunt to the girl who freed three murderers last night... this same girl who murdered yer town's Sheriff and a good young man— married, he was, and with a kid on the way. He stood before her with 'is defenseless hands raised, pleadin for his life on behalf of his wife and his babby to come, and still she shot 'im! Cruel, she is! Cruel and heartless!"

A mutter ran through the crowd. Rhea raised her twisted old claws and it stilled at once. She turned in a slow circle to see them all, hands still raised, looking like the world's oldest, ugliest prizefighter.

"Strangers came and ye welcomed em in!" she cried in her rusty crow's voice.

"Welcomed em and gave em bread to eat, and it's ruin they've fed ye in return!"

The deaths of those ye loved and depended on, spoilage to the time of the harvest,

and gods know what curses upon the time to *follow fin de ano!*"

More murmurs, now louder. She had touched their deepest fear: that this year's evil would spread, might even snarl the newly threaded stock which had so slowly and hopefully begun to emerge along the Outer Arc.

"But they've gone and likely won't be back!" Rhea continued. "Mayhap just as well—why should their strange blood taint our ground? But there's this other... one raised among us ... a young woman gone traitor to her town and rogue among her own kind."

Her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper on this last phrase; her listeners strained forward to hear, faces grim, eyes big. And now Rhea pulled the pallid, skinny woman in the rusty black dress forward. She stood Cordelia in front other like a doll or a ventriloquist's dummy, and whispered in her ear ... but the whisper travelled, somehow; they all heard it.

"Come, dear. Tell em what ye told me."

In a dead, carrying voice, Cordelia said: "She said she wouldn't be the Mayor's gilly. He wasn't good enough for such as her, she said. And then she seduced Will Dearborn. The price of her body was a fine position in Gilead as his consort . . . and the murder of Hart Thorin. Dearborn paid her price. Lusty as he was for her, he paid gladly. His friends helped; they may have had the use of 'er as well, for all I know. Chancellor Rimer must have gotten in their way. Or p'rhaps they just saw him, and felt like doing him, too."

"Bastards!" Pettie cried. "Sneaking young culls!"

"Now tell cm what's needed to clarify the new season before it's sp'iled, dearie," Rhea said in a crooning voice.

Cordelia Delgado raised her head and looked around at the men. She took a breath, pulling the sour, intermingled smells of gray and beer and smoke and whiskey deep into her spinster's lungs.

"Take her. Ye must take her. I say it in love and sorrow, so I do."

Silent. Their eyes.

"Paint her hands."

The glass gaze of the thing on the wall, looking its stuffed judgment over the waiting room.

"*Charyou tree,*" Cordelia whispered.

They did not cry their agreement but sighed it, like autumn wind through stripped

trees.

### 3

Sheemie ran after the bad Coffin Hunter and Susan-sai until he could literally run no more—his lungs were afire and the stitch which had formed in his side turned into a cramp. He pitched forward onto the grass of the Drop, his left hand clutching his right armpit, grimacing with pain.

He lay there for some time with his face deep in the fragrant grass, knowing they were getting farther and farther ahead but also knowing it would do him no good to get up and start running again until the stitch was good and gone. If he tried to hurry the process, the stitch would simply come back and lay him low again. So he lay where he was, lifting his head to look at the tracks left by Susan-sai and the bad Coffin Hunter, and he was just about ready to try his feet when Caprichoso bit him. Not a nip, mind you, but a good healthy chomp. Capi had had a difficult twenty-four hours, and he hadn't much liked to see the author of all his misery lying on the grass, apparently taking a nap.

"*Yeee-OWWWW-by-damn!*" Sheemie cried, and rocketed to his feet. There was nothing so magical as a good bite on the ass, a man of more philosophic bent might have reflected; it made all other concerns, no matter how heavy or sorrowful, disappear like smoke.

He whirled about. "Why did you do that, you mean old sneak of a Capi?" Sheemie was rubbing his bottom vigorously, and large tears of pain stood out in his eyes.

"That hurts like . . . like a big old *sonovabitch!*"

Caprichoso extended his neck to its maximum length, bared his teeth in the satanic grin which only mules and dromedaries can command, and brayed. To Sheemie that bray sounded very like laughter.

The mule's lead still trailed back between his sharp little hoofs. Sheemie reached for it, and when Capi dipped his head to inflict another bite, the boy gave him a good hard whack across the side of his narrow head. Capi snorted and blinked. "You had that coming, mean old Capi," Sheemie said. "I'll have to shit from a squat for a week, so I will. Won't be able to sit on the damned jakes." He doubled the lead over his fist and climbed aboard the mule. Capi made no attempt to buck him off, but Sheemie winced as his wounded part settled atop the ridge of the

mule's spine. This was good luck just the same, though, he thought as he kicked the animal into motion. His ass hurt, but at least he wouldn't have to walk ... or try to run with a stitch in his side.

"Go on, stupid!" he said. "Hurry up! Fast as you can, you old sonovabitch!"

In the course of the next hour, Sheemie called Capi "you old sonovabitch" as often as possible—he had discovered, as many others had before him, that only the first cussword is really hard; after that, there's nothing quite like them for relieving one's feelings.

#### 4

Susan's trail cut diagonally across the Drop toward the coast and the grand old adobe that rose there. When Sheemie reached Seafront, he dismounted outside the arch and only stood, wondering what to do next. That they had come here, he had no doubt—Susan's horse, Pylon, and the bad Coffin Hunter's horse were tethered side by side in the shade, occasionally dropping their heads and blowing in the pink stone trough that ran along the courtyard's ocean side.

What to do now? The riders who came and went beneath the arch (mostly white-headed *vaqs* who'd been considered too old to form a part of Lengyll's party) paid no attention to the inn-boy and his mule, but Miguel might be a different story.

The old *mozo* had never liked him, acted as if he thought Sheemie would turn thief, given half a chance, and if he saw Coral's slop-and-carry-boy skulking in the courtyard, Miguel would very likely drive him away.

*No, he won't, he thought grimly. Not today, today I can't let him boss me. I won't go even if he hollers.*

But if the old man *did* holler and raised an alarm, what then? The bad Coffin Hunter might come and kill him. Sheemie had reached a point where he was willing to die for his friends, but not unless it served a purpose.

So he stood in the cold sunlight, shifting from foot to foot, irresolute, wishing he was smarter than he was, that he could think of a plan. An hour passed this way, then two. It was slow time, each passing moment an exercise in frustration. He sensed any opportunity to help Susan-sai slip-ping away, but didn't know what to do about it. Once he heard what sounded like thunder from the west . . . although a bright fall day like this didn't seem right for thunder.



He had about decided to chance the courtyard anyway—it was temporarily deserted, and he might be able to make it across to the main house—when the man he had feared came staggering out of the stables.

Miguel Torres was festooned with reap-charms and was very drunk. He approached the center of the courtyard in rolling side-to-side loops, the tugstring of his *sombrero* twisted against his scrawny throat, his long white hair flying. The front of his *chibosa* was wet, as if he had tried to take a leak without remembering that you had to unlimber your dingus first. He had a small ceramic jug in one hand. His eyes were fierce and bewildered.

"Who done this?" Miguel cried. He looked up at the afternoon sky and the Demon Moon which floated there. Little as Sheemie liked the old man, his heart cringed. It was bad luck to look directly at old Demon, so it was. "Who done this thing? I ask that you tell me, *senor! Por favor!*" A pause, then a scream so powerful that Miguel reeled on his feet and almost fell. He raised his fists, as if he would box an answer out of the winking face in the moon, then dropped them wearily. Corn liquor slopped from the neck of the jug and wet him further. "*Maricon,*" he muttered. He staggered to the wall (almost tripping over the rear legs of the bad Coffin Hunter's horse as he went), then sat down with his back against the adobe wall. He drank deeply from the jug, then pulled his *sombrero* up and settled it over his eyes. His arm twitched the jug, then settled it back, as if in the end it had proved too heavy. Sheemie waited until the old man's thumb came unhooked from the jughandle and the hand flopped onto the cobbles. He started forward, then decided to wait even a little longer. Miguel was old and Miguel was mean. but Sheemie guessed Miguel might also be tricky. Lots of folks were, especially the mean ones.

He waited until he heard Miguel's dusty snores, then led Capi into the courtyard, wincing at every clop of the mule's hooves. Miguel never stirred, however. Sheemie tied Capi to the end of the hitching rail (winc-ing again as Caprichoso brayed a tuneless greeting to the horses tied there), then walked quickly across to the main door, through which he had never in his life expected to pass. He put his hand on the great iron latch, looked back once more at the old man sleeping against the wall, then opened the door and tiptoed in.

He stood for a moment in the oblong of sun the open door admitted, his shoulders hunched all the way up to his ears, expecting a hand to settle on the scruff of his

neck (which bad-natured folk always seemed able to find, no matter how high you hunched your shoulders) at any moment; an angry voice would follow, asking what he thought he was doing here.

The foyer stood empty and silent. On the far wall was a tapestry depicting *vaqueros* herding horses along the Drop; against it leaned a guitar with a broken string. Sheemie's feet sent back echoes no matter how lightly he walked. He shivered. This was a house of murder now, a bad place. There were likely ghosts. Still, Susan was here. Somewhere.

He passed through the double doors on the far side of the foyer and entered the reception hall. Beneath its high ceiling, his footfalls echoed more loudly than ever. Long-dead mayors looked down at him from the walls; most had spooky eyes that seemed to follow him as he walked, marking him as an intruder. He knew their eyes were only paint, but still . . .

One in particular troubled him: a fat man with clouds of red hair, a bulldog mouth, and a mean glare in his eye, as if he wanted to ask what some halfwit inn-boy was doing in the Great Hall at Mayor's House.

"Quit looking at me that way, you big old sonuvabitch," Sheemie whispered, and felt a little better. For the moment, at least.

Next came the dining hall, also empty, with the long trestle tables pushed back against the wall. There was the remains of a meal on one—a single plate of cold chicken and sliced bread, half a mug of ale. Looking at those few bits of food on a table that had served dozens at various fairs and festivals—that should have served dozens this very day—brought the enormity of what had happened home to Sheemie. And the sadness of it, too. Things had changed in Hambry, and would likely never be the same again.

These long thoughts did not keep him from gobbling the leftover chicken and bread, or from chasing it with what remained in the alepot. It had been a long, foodless day.

He belched, clapped both hands over his mouth, eyes making quick and guilty side-to-side darts above his dirty fingers, and then walked on.

The door at the far end of the room was latched but unlocked. Sheemie opened it and poked his head out into the corridor which ran the length of Mayor's House. The way was lit with gas chandeliers, and was as broad as an avenue. It was empty—at least for the moment—but he could hear whispering voices from other

rooms, and perhaps other floors, as well. He supposed they belonged to the maids and any other servants that might be about this afternoon, but they sounded very ghostly to him, just the same. Perhaps one belonged to Mayor Thorin, wandering the cor-ridor right in front of him (if Sheemie could but see him . . . which he was glad he couldn't). Mayor Thorin wandering and wondering what had happened to him, what this cold jellylike stuff soaking into his nightshirt might be, who—

A hand gripped Sheemie's arm just above the elbow. He almost shrieked.

"Don't!" a woman whispered. "For your father's sake!"

Sheemie somehow managed to keep the scream in. He turned. And there, wearing jeans and a plain checked ranch-shirt, her hair tied back, her pale face set, her dark eyes blazing, stood the Mayor's widow.

"S-S-Sai Thorin ... I... I... I..."

There was nothing else he could think of to say. *Now she'll call for the guards o' the watch, if there be any left*, he thought. In a way, it would be a relief

"Have ye come for the girl? The Delgado girl?"

Grief had been good to Olive, in a terrible way—had made her face seem less plump, and oddly young. Her dark eyes never left his, and forbade any attempt at a lie. Sheemie nodded.

"Good. I can use your help, boy. She's down below, in the pantry, and she's guarded."

Sheemie gaped, not believing what he was hearing.

"Do you think I believe she had anything to do with Hart's murder?" Olive asked, as if Sheemie had objected to her idea. "I may be fat and not so speedy on my pins anymore, but I'm not a complete idiot. Come on, now. Seafront's not a good place for sai Delgado just now—too many people from town know where she is."

## 5

"Roland."

*He will hear this voice in uneasy dreams for the rest of his life, never quite remembering what he has dreamed, only knowing that the dreams leave him feeling ill somehow—walking restlessly, straightening pictures in loveless rooms, listening to the call to muzzein in alien town squares.*

"Roland of Gilead."

*This voice, which he almost recognizes; a voice so like his own that a psychiatrist from Eddie's or Susannah's or Jake's when-and-where would say it is his voice, the voice of his subconscious, but Roland knows better; Roland knows that often the voices that sound the most like our own when they speak in our heads are those of the most terrible outsiders, the most dangerous intruders.*

*"Roland, son of Steven."*

*The ball has taken him first to Hambry and to Mayor's House, and he would see more of what is happening there, but then it takes him away— calls him away in that strangely familiar voice, and he has to go. There is no choice because, unlike Rhea or Jonas, he is not watching the ball and the creatures who speak soundlessly within it; he is inside the ball, a part of its endless pink storm.*

*"Roland, come. Roland, see."*

*And so the storm whirls him first up and then away. He flies across the Drop, rising and rising through stacks of air first warm and then cold, and he is not alone in the pink storm which bears him west along the Path of the Beam. Sheb flies past him, his hat cocked back on his head; he is singing "Hey Jude " at the top of his lungs as his nicotine-stained fingers plink keys that are not there—transported by his tune, Sheb doesn't seem to realize that the storm has ripped his piano away.*

*"Roland, come,"*

*the voice says—the voice of the storm, the voice of the glass—and Roland comes. The Romp flies by him, glassy eyes blazing with pink light. A scrawny man in farmer's overalls goes flying past, his long red hair streaming out behind him. "Life for you, and for your crop, " he says—something like that, anyway—and then he's gone. Next, spinning like a weird windmill, comes an iron chair (to Roland it looks like a torture de-vice) equipped with wheels, and the boy gunslinger thinks The Lady of Shadows without knowing why he thinks it, or what it means. Now the pink storm is carrying him over blasted mountains, now over a fertile green delta where a broad river runs its oxbow squiggles like a vein, reflecting a placid blue sky that turns to the pink of wild roses as the storm passes above. Ahead, Roland sees an uprushing column of dark-ness and his heart quails, but this is where the pink storm is taking him, and this is where he must go. I want to get out, he thinks, but he's not stupid, he realizes the truth: he may never get out. The wizard's glass has swallowed him. He may re-main in its stormy,*

*muddled eye forever.*

*I'll shoot my way out, if I have to, he thinks, but no—he has no guns. He is naked in the storm, rushing bareass toward that virulent blue-black infection that has buried all the landscape beneath it.*

*And yet he hears singing.*

*Faint but beautiful—a sweet harmonic sound that makes him shiver and think of Susan: bird and bear and hare and fish.*

*Suddenly Sheemie's mule (Caprichoso, Roland thinks, a beautiful name) goes past, galloping on thin air with his eyes as bright as firedims in the storm's lumbre fuego. Following him, wearing a sombrero and riding a broom festooned with fluttering reap-charms, comes Rhea of the Coos. "I'll get you, my pretty!" she screams at the fleeing mule, and then, cackling, she is gone, zooming and brooming.*

*Roland plunges into the black, and suddenly his breath is gone. The world around him is noxious darkness; the air seems to creep on his skin like a layer of bugs. He is buffeted, boxed to and fro by invisible fists, then driven downward in a dive so violent he fears he will be smashed against the ground: so fell Lord Perth.*

*Dead fields and deserted villages roll up out of the gloom; he sees blasted trees that will give no shade—oh, but all is shade here, all is death here, this is the edge of End-World, where some dark day he will come, and all is death here.*

*"Gunslinger, this is Thunderclap."*

*"Thunderclap," he says.*

*"Here are the unbreathing; the white faces."*

*"The unbreathing. The white faces. "*

*Yes. He knows that, somehow. This is the place of slaughtered soldiers, the cloven helm, the rusty halberd; from here come the pale warriors. This is Thunderclap, where clocks run backward and the grave-yards vomit out their dead.*

*Ahead is a tree like a crooked, clutching hand; on its topmost branch a billy-bumbler has been impaled. It should be dead, but as the pink storm carries Roland past, it raises its head and looks at him with inexpressible pain and weariness.*

*"Oy!" it cries, and then it, too, is gone and not to be remembered for many years.*

*"Look ahead, Roland—see your destiny."*

*Now, suddenly, he knows that voice—it is the voice of the Turtle. He looks and sees a brilliant blue-gold glow piercing the dirty darkness of Thunderclap. Before*

*he can do more than register it, he breaks out of the darkness and into the light like something coming out of an egg, a creature at last being born.*

"Light! Let there be light!"

*the voice of the Turtle cries, and Roland has to put his hands to his eyes and peek through his fingers to keep from being blinded. Below him is a field of blood—or so he thinks then, a boy of fourteen who has that day done his first real killing.*

*This is the blood that has flowed out of Thunderclap and threatens to drown our side of the world, he thinks, and it will not be for untold years that he will finally rediscover his time inside the ball and put this memory together with Eddie's dream and tell his com-padres, as they sit in the turnpike breakdown lane at the end of the night, that he was wrong, that he had been fooled by the brilliance, coming as it did, so hard on the heels of Thunderclap's shadows. "It wasn't blood but roses," he tells Eddie, Susannah, and Jake.*

"Gunslinger, look—look there."

*Yes, there it is, a dusty gray-black pillar rearing on the horizon: the Dark Tower, the place where all Beams, all lines of force, converge. In its spiraling windows he sees fitful electric blue fire and hears the cries of all those pent within; he senses both the strength of the place and the wrong-ness of it; he can feel how it is spooling error across everything, softening the divisions between the worlds, how its potential for mischief is growing stronger even as disease weakens its truth and coherence, like a body afflicted with cancer; this jutting arm of dark gray stone is the world's great mystery and last awful riddle.*

*It is the Tower, the Dark Tower rearing to the sky, and as Roland rushes toward it in the pink storm, he thinks: I will enter you, me and my friends, if ka wills it so; we will enter you and we will conquer the wrong-ness within you. It may be years yet, but I swear by bird and bear and hare and fish, by all I love that—  
But now the sky fills with flaggy clouds which flow out of Thunderclap, and the world begins to go dark; the blue light from the Tower's rising windows shines like mad eyes, and Roland hears thousands of screaming, wailing voices.*

"You will kill everything and everyone you love,"

*says the voice of the Turtle, and now it is a cruel voice, cruel and hard.*

"and still the Tower will be pent shut against you."

*The gunslinger draws in all his breath and draws together all his force; when he cries his answer to the Turtle, he does so for all the generations of his blood:*

*"NO! IT WILL NOT STAND! WHEN I COME HERE IN MY BODY, IT WILL NOT STAND! I SWEAR ON MY FA-THER 'S NAME. IT WILL NOT STAND!"*

"Then die,"

*the voice says, and Roland is hurled at the gray-black stone flank of the Tower, to be smashed there like a bug against a rock. But before that can happen—*

## 6

Cuthbert and Alain stood watching Roland with increasing concern. He had the piece of Maerlyn's Rainbow raised to his face, cupped in his hands as a man might cup a ceremonial goblet before making a toast. The drawstring bag lay crumpled on the dusty toes of his boots; his cheeks and forehead were washed in a pink glow that neither boy liked. It seemed alive, somehow, and hungry.

They thought, as if with one mind: *I can't see his eyes. Where are his eyes?*

"Roland?" Cuthbert repeated. "If we're going to get out to Hanging Rock before they're ready for us, you have to put that thing away."

Roland made no move to lower the ball. He muttered something un-der his breath; later, when Cuthbert and Alain had a chance to compare notes, they both agreed it had been *thunderclap*.

"Roland?" Alain asked, stepping forward. As gingerly as a surgeon slipping a scalpel into the body of a patient, he slipped his right hand be-tween the curve of the ball and Roland's bent, studious face. There was no response. Alain pulled back and turned to Cuthbert.

"Can you touch him?" Bert asked.

Alain shook his head. "Not at all. It's like he's gone somewhere far away."

"We have to wake him up." Cuthbert's voice was dust-dry and shaky at the edges.

"Vannay told us that if you wake a person from a deep hypnotic trance too suddenly, he can go mad," Alain said. "Remember? I don't know if I dare—"

Roland stirred. The pink sockets where his eyes had been seemed to grow. His mouth flattened into the line of bitter determination they both knew well.

*"No! It will not stand!"* he cried in a voice that made gooseflesh rip-ple the skin of the other two boys; that was not Roland's voice at all, at least not as he was now; that was the voice of a man.

"No," Alain said much later, when Roland slept and he and Cuthbert , sat up

before the campfire. "That was the voice of a king."

Now, however, the two of them only looked at their absent, roaring friend, paralyzed with fright.

*"When I come here in my body, it will not stand! I swear on my father's name, IT WILL NOT STAND!"*

Then, as Roland's unnaturally pink face contorted, like the face of a man who confronts some unimaginable horror, Cuthbert and Alain lunged forward. It was no longer a question of perhaps destroying him in an effort to save him; if they didn't do something, the glass would kill him as they watched.

In the dooryard of the Bar K, it had been Cuthbert who clipped Roland; this time Alain did the honors, administering a hard right to the center of the gunslinger's forehead. Roland tumbled backward, the ball spilling out of his loosening hands and the terrible pink light leaving his face. Cuthbert caught the boy and Alain caught the ball. Its heavy pink glow was weirdly insistent, beating at his eyes and pulling at his mind, but Alain stuffed it resolutely into the drawstring bag again without looking at it... and as he pulled the cord, yanking the bag's mouth shut, he saw the pink light wink out, as if it knew it had lost. For the time being, at least. He turned back, and winced at the sight of the bruise puffing up from the middle of Roland's brow. "Is he—"

"Out cold," Cuthbert said.

"He better come to soon."

Cuthbert looked at him grimly, with not a trace of his usual amiability. "Yes," he said, "you're certainly right about that."

## 7

Sheemie waited at the foot of the stairs which led down to the kitchen area, shifting uneasily from foot to foot and waiting for sai Thorin to come back, or to call him. He didn't know how long she'd been in the kitchen, but it felt like forever. He wanted her to come back, and more than that—more than anything—he wanted her to bring Susan-sai with her. Sheemie had a terrible feeling about this place and this day; a feeling that darkened like the sky, which was now all obscured with smoke in the west. What was happening out there, or if it had anything to do with the thundery sounds he'd heard earlier, Sheemie didn't



know, but he wanted to be out of here before the smoke-hazed sun went down and the *real* De-mon Moon, not its pallid day-ghost, rose in the sky.

One of the swinging doors between the corridor and the kitchen pushed open and Olive came hurrying out.. She was alone.

"She's in the pantry, all right," Olive said. She raked her fingers through her graying hair. "I got that much out of those two *pupuras*, but no more. I knew it was going to be that way as soon as they started talking that stupid crunk of theirs."

There was no proper word for the dialect of the Mejis *vaqueros*, but "crunk" served well enough among the Barony's higher-born citizens. Olive knew both of the *vaqs* guarding the pantry, in the vague way of a person who has once ridden a lot and passed gossip and weather with other Drop-riders, and she knew damned well these old boys could do better than crunk. They had spoken it so they could pretend to misunderstand her, and save both them and her the embarrassment of an outright refusal. She had gone along with the deception for much the same reason, although she could have responded with crunk of her own perfectly well—and called them some names their mothers never used—had she wanted.

"I told them there were men upstairs," she said, "and I thought maybe they meant to steal the silver. I said I wanted the *maloficios* turned out. And still they played dumb. *No habla, sai*. Shit. *Shit!*"

Sheemie thought of calling them a couple of big old sonuvabitches, and decided to keep silent. She was pacing back and forth in front of him and throwing an occasional burning look at the closed kitchen doors. At last she stopped in front of Sheemie again.

"Turn out your pockets," she said. "Let's see what you have for hopes and garlands."

Sheemie did as she asked, producing a little pocketknife (a gift from Stanley Ruiz) and a half-eaten cookie from one. From the other he brought out three lady-finger firecrackers, a big-banger, and a few sulfur matches.

Olive's eyes gleamed when she saw these. "Listen to me, Sheemie," she said.

Cuthbert patted Roland's face with no result. Alain pushed him aside, knelt, and

took the gunslinger's hands. He had never used the touch this way, but had been told it was possible—that one could reach another's mind, in at least some cases.

*Roland! Roland, wake up! Please! We need you!*

At first there was nothing. Then Roland stirred, muttered, and pulled his hands out of Alain's. In the moment before his eyes opened, both of the other two boys were struck by the same fear of what they might see: no eyes at all, only raving pink light.

But they were Roland's eyes, all right—those cool blue shooter's eyes.

He struggled to gain his feet, and failed the first time. He held out his hands.

Cuthbert took one, Alain the other. As they pulled him up, Bert saw a strange and frightening thing: there were threads of white in Roland's hair. There had been none that morning; he would have sworn to it. The morning had been a long time ago, however.

"How long was I out?" Roland touched the bruise in the center of his forehead with the tips of his fingers and winced.

"Not long," Alain said. "Five minutes, maybe. Roland, I'm sorry I hit you, but I had to. It was ... I thought it was killing you."

"Mayhap 'twas. Is it safe?"

Alain pointed wordlessly to the drawstring bag.

"Good. It's best one of you carry it for now. I might be . . ." He searched for the right word, and when he found it, a small, wintry smile touched the corners of his mouth—"tempted," he finished. "Let's ride for Hanging Rock. We've got work yet to finish."

"Roland . . ." Cuthbert began.

Roland turned, one hand on the horn of his horse's saddle.

Cuthbert licked his lips, and for a moment Alain didn't think he would be able to ask. *If you don't, I will*, Alain thought . . . but Bert managed, bringing the words out in a rush.

"What did you see?"

"Much," Roland said. "I saw much, but most of it is already fading out of my mind, the way dreams do when you wake up. What I do remember I'll tell you as we ride. You must know, because it changes everything. We're going back to Gilead, but not for long."

"Where after that?" Alain asked, mounting.

"West. In search of the Dark Tower. If we survive today, that is. Come on. Let's take those tankers."

## 9

The two *vaqs* were rolling smokes when there was a loud bang from up-stairs. They both jumped and looked at each other, the tobacco from their works-in-progress sifting down to the floor in small brown flurries. A woman shrieked. The doors burst open. It was the Mayor's widow again, this time accompanied by a maid. The *vaqs* knew her well—Maria Tomas, the daughter of an old *compadre* from the Piano Ranch.

"The thieving bastards have set the place on fire!" Maria cried, speak-ing to them in crunk. "Come and help!"

"Maria, sai, we have orders to guard—"

"A *putina* locked in the pantry?" Maria shouted, her eyes blazing. "Come, ye stupid old donkey, before the whole place catches! Then ye can explain to Senor Lengyll why ye stood here using yer thumbs for fart-corks while Seafront burned down around yer ears!"

"Go on!" Olive snapped. "Are you cowards?"

There were several smaller bangs as, above them in the great parlor, Sheemie set off the lady-fingers. He used the same match to light the drapes.

The two *viejos* exchanged a glance. "*Andelay*," said the older of the two, then looked back at Maria. He no longer bothered with the crunk. "Watch this door," he said.

"Like a hawk," she agreed.

The two old men bustled out, one gripping the cords of his *bolas*, the other pulling a long knife from the scabbard on his belt.

As soon as the women heard their footsteps on the stairs at the end of the hall, Olive nodded to Maria and they crossed the room. Maria threw the bolts; Olive pulled the door open. Susan came out at once, looking from one to the other, then smiling tentatively. Maria gasped at the sight of her mistress's swelled face and the blood crusted around her nose.

Susan took Maria's hand before the maid could touch her face and squeezed her fingers gently. "Do ye think Thorin would want me now?" she asked, and then

seemed to realize who her other rescuer was. "Olive ... sai Thorin ... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be cruel. But ye must believe that Roland, him ye know as Will Dearborn, would never—"

"I know it well," Olive said, "and there's no time for this now. Come on."

She and Maria led Susan out of the kitchen, away from the stairs ascending to the main house and toward the storage rooms at the far north end of the lower level. In the drygoods storage room, Olive told the two of them to wait. She was gone for perhaps five minutes, but to Susan and Maria it seemed an eternity.

When she came back, Olive was wearing a wildly colored *scrape* much too big for her—it might have been her husband's, but Susan thought it looked too big for the late Mayor, as well. Olive had tucked a piece of it into the side of her jeans to keep from stumbling over it. Slung over her arm like blankets, she had two more, both smaller and lighter. "Put these on," she said. "It's going to be cold."

Leaving the drygoods store, they went down a narrow servants' passageway toward the back courtyard. There, if they were fortunate (and if Miguel was still unconscious), Sheemie would be waiting for them with mounts. Olive hoped with all her heart that they would be fortunate. She wanted Susan safely away from Hambry before the sun went down.

And before the moon rose.

## 10

"Susan's been taken prisoner," Roland told the others as they rode west toward Hanging Rock. "That's the first thing I saw in the glass."

He spoke with such an air of absence that Cuthbert almost reined up. This wasn't the ardent lover of the last few months. It was as if Roland had found a dream to ride through the pink air within the ball, and part of him rode it still. *Or is it riding him?* Cuthbert wondered.

"What?" Alain asked. "Susan taken? How? By whom? Is she all right?"

"Taken by Jonas. He hurt her some, but not too badly. She'll heal . . . and she'll live. I'd turn around in a second if I thought her life was in any real danger."

Ahead of them, appearing and disappearing in the dust like a mirage, was Hanging Rock. Cuthbert could see the sunlight pricking hazy sun-stars on the tankers, and he could see men. A lot of them. A lot of horses, as well. He patted the neck of his

own mount, then glanced across to make sure Alain had Lengyll's machine-gun. He did. Cuthbert reached around to the small of his back, making sure of the slingshot. It was there. Also his deerskin ammunition bag, which now contained a number of the big-bangers Sheemie had stolen as well as steel shot.

*He's using every ounce of his will to keep from going back, anyway,* Cuthbert thought. He found the realization comforting—sometimes Roland scared him. There was something in him that went beyond steel. Some-thing like madness. If it was there, you were glad to have it on your side ... but often enough you wished it wasn't there at all. On *anybody's* side.

"Where is she?" Alain asked.

"Reynolds took her back to Seafront. She's locked in the pantry ... or *was* locked there. I can't say which, exactly, because . . ." Roland paused, thinking. "The ball sees far, but sometimes it sees more. Sometimes it sees a future that's already happening."

"How can the future already be happening?" Alain asked. "I don't know, and I don't think it was always that way. I think it's more to do with the world than Maerlyn's Rainbow. Time is strange now. We *know* that, don't we? How things sometimes seem to ... slip. It's almost as if there's a thinny everywhere, breaking things down. But Su-san's safe. I know that, and that's enough for me. Sheemie is going to help her ... or *is* helping her. Somehow Jonas missed Sheemie, and he followed Susan all the way back."

"Good for Sheemie!" Alain said, and pumped his fist into the air. "Hurrah!" Then: "What about us? Did you see us in this future?"

"No. This part was all quick—I hardly snatched more than a glance before the ball took me away. *Flew* me away, it seemed. But ... I saw smoke on the horizon. I remember that. It could have been the smoke of burning tankers, or the brush piled in front of Eyebolt, or both. I think we're going to succeed."

Cuthbert was looking at his old friend in a queerly distraught way. The young man so deeply in love that Bert had needed to knock him into the dust of the courtyard in order to wake him up to his responsibilities . . . where was that young man, exactly? What had changed him, given him those disturbing strands of white hair?

"If we survive what's ahead," Cuthbert said, watching the gunslinger closely, "she'll meet us on the road. Won't she, Roland?"

He saw the pain on Roland's face, and now understood: the lover was here, but the

ball had taken away his joy and left only grief. That, and some new purpose—yes, Cuthbert felt it very well—which had yet to be stated.

"I don't know," Roland said. "I almost hope not, because we can never be as we were."

"*What?*" This time Cuthbert *did* rein up.

Roland looked at him calmly enough, but now there were tears in his eyes.

"We are fools *of ka*" the gunslinger said. "*Ka* like a wind, Susan calls it." He looked first at Cuthbert on his left, then at Alain on his right. "The Tower is our *ka*; mine especially. But it isn't hers, nor she mine. No more is John Parson our *ka*. We're not going toward his men to defeat him, but only because they're in our way." He raised his hands, then dropped them again, as if to say, *What more do you need me to tell you?*

"There *is* no Tower, Roland," Cuthbert said patiently. "I don't know what you saw in that glass ball, but there *is* no Tower. Well, as a symbol, I suppose—like Arthur's Cup, or the Cross of the man-Jesus—but not as a real thing, a real building—"

"Yes," Roland said. "It's real."

They looked at him uncertainly, and saw no doubt on his face. "It's real, and our fathers know. Beyond the dark land—I can't re-member its name now, it's one of the things I've lost—is End-World, and in End-World stands the Dark Tower. Its existence is the great secret our fathers keep; it's what has held them together as *ka-tet* across all the years of the world's decline. When we return to Gilead—if we return, and I now think we will—I'll tell them what I've seen, and they'll confirm what I say."

"You saw all that in the glass?" Alain asked in an awe-hushed voice.

"I saw much."

"But not Susan Delgado," Cuthbert said.

"No. When we finish with yonder men and she finishes with Mejis, her part in our *ka-tet* ends. Inside the ball, I was given a choice: Susan, and my life as her husband and father of the child she now carries ... or the Tower." Roland wiped his face with a shaking hand. "I would choose Susan in an instant, if not for one thing: the Tower is crumbling, and if it falls, everything we know will be swept away. There will be chaos be-yond our imagining. We must go ... *and we will go.*"

Above his young and unlined cheeks, below his young and unlined brow, were the ancient killer's eyes that Eddie Dean would first glimpse in the mirror of an air-liner's bathroom. But now they swam with childish tears.

There was nothing childish in his voice, however.

"I choose the Tower. I must. Let her live a good life and long with someone else—she will, in time. As for me, I choose the Tower."

## 11

Susan mounted on Pylon, which Sheemie had hastened to bring around to the rear courtyard after lighting the draperies of the great parlor on fire. Olive Thorin rode one of the Barony geldings with Sheemie double-mounted behind her and holding onto Capi's lead. Maria opened the back gate, wished them good luck, and the three trotted out. The sun was west-ering now, but the wind had pulled away most of the smoke that had risen earlier. Whatever had happened in the desert, it was over now ... or hap-pening on some other layer of the same present time.

*Roland, be thee well, Susan thought. I'll see thee soon, dear . . . as soon as I can.*

"Why are we going north?" she asked after half an hour's silent riding.

"Because Seacoast Road's best."

"But—"

"Hush! They'll find you gone and search the house first . . . if t'asn't burned flat, that is. Not finding you there, they'll send west, along the Great Road." She cast an eye on Susan that was not much like the dithery, slightly confabulated Olive Thorin that folks in Hambry knew ... or thought they knew. "If I know that's the direction you'd choose, so will others we'd do well to avoid."

Susan was silent. She was too confused to speak, but Olive seemed to know what she was about, and Susan was grateful for that.

"By the time they get around to sniffing west, it'll be dark. Tonight we'll stay in one of the sea-cliff caves five miles or so from here. I grew up a fisherman's daughter, and I know all those caves, none better." The thought of the caves she'd played in as a girl seemed to cheer her. "To-morrow we'll cut west, as you like. I'm afraid you're going to have a plump old widow as a chaperone for a bit. Better get used to the idea."

"Thee's too good," Susan said. "Ye should send Sheemie and I on alone, sai."

"And go back to what? Why, I can't even get two old trailhands on kitchen-duty to follow my orders. Fran Lengyll's boss of the shooting-match now, and I've no urge to wait and see how he does at it. Nor if he decides he'd be better off with me adjudged mad and put up safe in a *haci* with bars on the windows. Or shall I stay to see how Hash Renfrew does as Mayor, with his boots up on my tables?" Olive actually laughed.

"Sai, I'm sorry."

"We shall all be sorry later on," Olive said, sounding remarkably cheery about it.

"For now, the most important thing is to reach those caves unobserved. It must seem that we vanished into thin air. Hold up."

Olive checked her horse, stood in the stirrups, looked around to make sure of her position, nodded, then twisted in the saddle so she could speak to Sheemie.

"Young man, it's time for ye to mount yer trusty mule and go back to Seafront. If there are riders coming after us, ye must turn em aside with a few well-chosen words. Will'ee do that?"

Sheemie looked stricken. "I don't have any well-chosen words, sai Thorin, so I don't. I hardly have any words at all."

"Nonsense," Olive said, and kissed Sheemie's forehead. "Go back at a goodish trot. If'ee spy no one coming after us by the time the sun touches the hills, then turn north again and follow. We shall wait for ye by the signpost. Do ye know where I mean?"

Sheemie thought he did, although it marked the outmost northern boundary of his little patch of geography. "The red 'un? With the *som-brero* on it, and the arrow pointing back for town?"

"The very one. Ye won't get that far until after dark, but there'll be plenty of moonlight tonight. If ye don't come right away, we'll wait. But ye must go back, and shift any men that might be chasing us off our track. Do ye understand?"

Sheemie did. He slid off Olive's horse, clucked Caprichoso forward, and climbed on board, wincing as the place the mule had bitten came down. "So it'll be, Olive-sai."

"Good, Sheemie. Good. Off'ee go, then."

"Sheemie?" Susan said. "Come to me a moment, please."

He did, holding his hat in front of him and looking up at her worship-fully. Susan bent and kissed him not on the forehead but firmly on the mouth. Sheemie came



close to fainting.

"Thankee-sai," Susan said. "For everything."

Sheemie nodded. When he spoke, he could manage nothing above a whisper. "

'Twas only *ka*," he said. "I know that... but I love you, Susan-sai. Go well. I'll see you soon."

"I look forward to it."

But there was no soon, and no later for them, either. Sheemie took one look back as he rode his mule south, and waved. Susan lifted her own hand in return. It was the last Sheemie ever saw of her, and in many ways, that was a blessing.

## 12

Latigo had set pickets a mile out from Hanging Rock, but the blond boy Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain encountered as they closed in on the tankers looked confused and unsure of himself, no danger to anyone. He had scurvy-blossoms around his mouth and nose, suggesting that the men Farson had sent on this duty had ridden hard and fast, with little in the way of fresh supplies.

When Cuthbert gave the Good Man's *sigul*—hands clasped to the chest, left above right, then both held out to the person being greeted—the blond picket did the same, and with a grateful smile.

"What spin and raree back there?" he asked, speaking with a strong In-World accent—to Roland, the boy sounded like a Nordite.

"Three boys who killed a couple of big bugs and then hied for the hills." Cuthbert replied. He was an eerily good mimic, and gave the boy back his own accent faultlessly. "I here were a tight. It be over now, but they did fight fearful."

"What—"

"No time," Roland said brusquely. "We have dispatches." He crossed his hands on his chest, then held them out. "Hile! Farson!"

"Good Man!" the blond returned smartly. He gave back the salute with a smile that said he would have asked Cuthbert where he was from and who he was related to, if there had been more time. Then they were past him and inside Latigo's perimeter. As easy as that.

"Remember that it's hit-and-run," Roland said. "Slow down for noth-ing. What we don't get must be left—there'll be no second pass."

"Gods, don't even suggest such a thing," Cuthbert said, but he was smiling. He pulled his sling out of its rudimentary holster and tested its elastic draw with a thumb. Then he licked the thumb and hoisted it to the wind. Not much problem there, if they came in as they were; the wind was strong, but at their backs. Alain unslung Lengyll's machine-gun, looked at it doubtfully, then yanked back the slide-cock. "I don't know about this, Roland. It's loaded, and I think I see how to use it, but—"

"Then use it," Roland said. The three of them were picking up speed now, the hooves of their horses drumming against the hardpan. The wind gusted, belling the fronts of their *scrapes*. "This is the sort of work it was meant for. If it jams, drop it and use your revolver. Are you ready?"

"Yes, Roland."

"Bert?"

"Aye," Cuthbert said in a wildly exaggerated Hambry accent, "so I am, so I am." Ahead of them, dust puffed as groups of riders passed before and behind the tankers, readying the column for departure. Men on foot looked around at the oncomers curiously but with a fatal lack of alarm.

Roland drew both revolvers. "*Gilead!*" he cried. "*Hile! Gilead!*"

He spurred Rusher to a gallop. The other two boys did the same. Cuthbert was in the middle again, sitting on his reins, slingshot in hand, lucifer matches radiating out of his tightly pressed lips.

The gunslingers rode down on Hanging Rock like furies.

## 13

Twenty minutes after sending Sheemie back south, Susan and Olive came around a sharp bend and found themselves face to face with three mounted men in the road. In the late-slanting sun, she saw that the one in the middle had a blue coffin tattooed on his hand. It was Reynolds. Susan's heart sank.

The one on Reynolds's left—he wore a stained white drover's hat and had a lazily cocked eye—she didn't know, but the one on the right, who looked like a stony-hearted preacher, was Laslo Rimer. It was Rimer that Reynolds glanced at, after smiling at Susan.

"Why, Las and I couldn't even get us a drink to send his late brother, the

Chancellor of Whatever You Want and the Minister of Thank You Very Much, on with a word," Reynolds said. "We hadn't hardly hit town before we got persuaded out here. I wasn't going to go, but . . . damn! That old lady's something. Could talk a corpse into giving a blowjob, if you'll pardon the crudity. I think your aunt may have lost a wheel or two off her cart, though, sai Delgado. She—"

"Your friends are dead," Susan told him.

Reynolds paused, shrugged. "Well now. Maybe *si* and maybe *no*. Me, I think I've decided to travel on without em even if they ain't. But I might hang around here one more night. This Reaping business . . . I've heard so much about the way folks do it in the Outers. 'Specially the bonfire part."

The man with the cocked eye laughed phlegmily.

"Let us pass," Olive said. "This girl has done nothing, and neither have I."

"She helped Dearborn escape," Rimer said, "him who murdered your own husband and my brother. I wouldn't call that nothing."

"The gods may restore Kimba Rimer in the clearing," Olive said, "but the truth is he looted half of this town's treasury, and what he didn't give over to John Farson, he kept for himself."

Rimer recoiled as if slapped.

"Ye didn't know I knew? Laslo, I'd be angry at how little any of ye thought of me ... except why would I want to be thought of by the likes of you, anyway? I knew enough to make me sick, leave it at that. I know that the man you're sitting beside—"

"Shut up," Rimer muttered.

"—was likely the one who cut yer brother's black heart open; sai Reynolds was seen that early morning in that wing, so I've been told—"

*"Shut up, you cunt!"*

"—and so I believe."

"Better do as he says, sai, and hold your tongue," Reynolds said. Some of the lazy good humor had left his face. Susan thought: *He doesn't like people knowing what he did. Not even when he's the one on top and what they know can't hurt him. And he's less without Jonas. A lot less. He knows it, too.*

"Let us pass," Olive said.

"No, sai, I can't do that."

"I'll help ye, then, shall I?"

Her hand had crept beneath the outrageously large *serape* during the palaver, and now she brought out a huge and ancient *pistola*, its handles of yellowed ivory, its filigreed barrel of old tarnished silver. On top was a brass powder-and-spark. Olive had no business even drawing the thing—it caught on her *serape*, and she had to fight it free. She had no business cocking it, either, a process that took both thumbs and two tries. But the three men were utterly flummoxed by the sight of the elderly blunderbuss in her hands, Reynolds as much as the other two; he sat his horse with his jaw hanging slack. Jonas would have wept.

"Get her!" a cracked old voice shrieked from behind the men block-ing the road.

"What's wrong with ye, ye stupid culls? GET HER!"

Reynolds started at that and went for his gun. He was fast, but he had given Olive too much of a headstart and was beaten, beaten cold. Even as he cleared leather with the barrel of his revolver, the Mayor's widow held the old gun out in both hands, and, squinching her eyes shut like a little girl who is forced to eat something nasty, pulled the trigger.

The spark flashed, but the damp powder only made a weary *floop* sound and disappeared in a puff of blue smoke. The ball—big enough to have taken Clay Reynolds's head off from the nose on up, had it fired— stayed in the barrel.

In the next instant his own gun roared in his fist. Olive's horse reared, whinnying. Olive went off the gelding head over boots, with a black hole in the orange stripe of her *serape*—the stripe which lay above her heart.

Susan heard herself screaming. The sound seemed to come from very far away. She might have gone on for some time, but then she heard the clop of approaching pony hooves from behind the men in the road... and knew. Even before the man with the lazy eye moved aside to show her, she knew, and her screams stopped. The galloped-out pony that had brought the witch back to Hambry had been replaced by a fresh one, but it was the same black cart, the same golden cabalistic symbols, the same driver. Rhea sat with the reins in her claws, her head ticking from side to side like the head of a rusty old robot, grinning at Susan without humor. Grinning as a corpse grins.

"Hello, my little sweeting," she said, calling her as she had all those months ago, on the night Susan had come to her hut to be proved honest. On the night Susan had come running most of the way, out of simple high spirits. Beneath the light of the Kissing Moon she had come, her blood high from the exercise, her skin

flushed; she had been singing "Care-less Love."

"Yer pallies and screw-buddies have taken my ball, ye ken," Rhea said, clucking the pony to a stop a few paces ahead of the riders. Even Reynolds looked down on her with uneasiness. "Took my lovely glam, that's what those bad boys did. Those bad, bad boys. But it showed me much while yet I had it, aye. It sees far, and in more ways than one. Much of it I've forgot ... but not which way ye'd come, my sweeting. Not which way that precious old dead bitch laying yonder on the road would bring ye. And now ye must go to town." Her grin widened, became some-thing unspeakable. "It's time for the fair, ye ken."

"Let me go," Susan said. "Let me go, if ye'd not answer to Roland of Gilead." Rhea ignored her and spoke to Reynolds. "Bind her hands before her and stand her in the back of the cart. There's people that'll want to see her. A good look is what they'll want, and a good look is just what they'll have. If her aunt's done a proper job, there'll be a lot of them in town. Get her up, now, and be smart about it."

## 14

Alain had time for one clear thought: *We could have gone around them—if what Roland said is true, then only the wizard's glass matters, and we have that. We could have gone around them.*

Except, of course, that was impossible. A hundred generations of gunslinger blood argued against it. Tower or no Tower, the thieves must not be allowed to have their prize. Not if they could be stopped.

Alain leaned forward and spoke directly into his horse's ear. "Jig or rear when I start shooting, and I'll knock your fucking brains out."

Roland led them in, outracing the other two on his stronger horse. The clot of men nearest by—five or six mounted, a dozen or more on foot and examining a pair of the oxen which had dragged the tankers out here—gazed at him stupidly until he began to fire, and then they scattered like quail. He got every one of the riders; their horses fled in a widening fan, trailing their reins (and, in one case, a dead soldier). Somewhere someone was shouting, "Harriers! Harriers! Mount up, you fools!"

"*Alain!*" Roland screamed as they bore down. In front of the tankers, a double handful of riders and armed men were coming together—*milling* together—in a

clumsy defensive line. "*Now! Now!*"

Alain raised the machine-gun, seated its rusty wire stock in the hollow of his shoulder, and remembered what little he knew about rapid-fire weapons: aim low, swing fast and smooth.

He touched the trigger and the speed-shooter bellowed into the dusty air, recoiling against his shoulder in a series of rapid thuds, shooting bright fire from the end of its perforated barrel. Alain raked it from left to right, running the sight above the scattering, shouting defenders and across the high steel hides of the tankers.

The third tanker actually blew up on its own. The sound it made was like no explosion Alain had ever heard: a guttural, muscular ripping sound accompanied by a brilliant flash of orange-red fire. The steel shell rose in two halves. One of these spun thirty yards through the air and landed on the desert floor in a furiously burning hulk; the other rose straight up into a column of greasy black smoke. A burning wooden wheel spun across the sky like a plate and came back down trailing sparks and burning splinters.

Men fled, screaming—some on foot, others laid flat along the necks of their nags, their eyes wide and panicky.

When Alain reached the end of the line of tankers, he reversed the track of the muzzle. The machine-gun was hot in his hands now, but he kept his finger pressed to the trigger. In this world, you had to use what you could while it still worked. Beneath him, his horse ran on as if it had understood every word Alain had whispered in its ear.

*Another! I want another!*

But before he could blow another tanker, the gun ceased its chatter—perhaps jammed, probably empty. Alain threw it aside and drew his re-volver. From beside him there came the *thuppp* of Cuthbert's slingshot, audible even over the cries of the men, the hoofbeats of the horses, the *whoosh* of the burning tanker. Alain saw a sputtering big-bang arc into the sky and come down exactly where Cuthbert had aimed: in the oil puddling around the wooden wheels of a tanker marked sunoco. For a moment Alain could clearly see the line of nine or a dozen holes in the tanker's bright side—holes he had put there with sai Lengyll's speed-shooter—and then there was a crack and a flash as the big-bang exploded. A moment later, the holes running along the bright flank of the tanker began to shimmer. The oil beneath them was on fire.

"Get out!" a man in a faded campaign hat yelled. "She's gointer blow! They 're all going to b— "

Alain shot him, exploding the side of his face and knocking him out of one old, sprung boot. A moment later the second tanker blew up. One burning steel panel shot out sideways, landed in the growing puddle of crude oil beneath a third tanker, and then that one exploded, as well. Black smoke rose in the air like the fumes of a funeral pyre; it darkened the day and drew an oily veil across the sun.

15

All six of Parson's chief lieutenants had been carefully described to Roland—to all fourteen gunslingers in training—and he recognized the man running for the *remuda* at once: George Latigo. Roland could have shot him as he ran, but that, ironically, would have made possible a get-away that was cleaner than he wanted. Instead, he shot the man who ran to meet him.

Latigo wheeled on the heels of his boots and stared at Roland with blazing, hate-filled eyes. Then he ran again, hiling another man, shouting for the riders who were huddled together beyond the burning zone.

Two more tankers exploded, whamming at Roland's eardrums with dull iron fists, seeming to suck the air back from his lungs like a riptide. The plan had been for Alain to perforate the tankers and for Cuthbert to then shoot in a steady, arcing stream of big-bangers, lighting the spilling oil. The one big-banger he actually shot seemed to confirm that the plan had been feasible, but it was the last slingshot-work Cuthbert did that day.

The ease with which the gunslingers had gotten inside the enemy's perimeter and the confusion which greeted their original charge could have been chalked up to inexperience and exhaustion, but the placing of the tankers had been Latigo's mistake, and his alone. He had drawn them tight without even thinking about it, and now they blew tight, one after another. Once the conflagration began, there was no chance of stopping it. Even before Roland raised his left arm and circled it in the air, signalling for Alain and Cuthbert to break off, the work was done.

Latigo's encampment was an oily inferno, and John Farson's plans for a motorized assault were so much black smoke being tattered apart by *the fin de ano* wind.

*"Ride!"* Roland screamed. *"Ride, ride, ride!"*

They spurred west, toward Eyebolt Canyon. As they went, Roland felt a single bullet drone past his left ear. It was, so far as he knew, the only shot fired at any of them during the assault on the tankers.

## 16

Latigo was in an ecstasy of fury, a perfect brain-bursting rage, and that was probably merciful—it kept him from thinking of what the Good Man would do when he learned of this fiasco. For the time being, all Latigo cared about was catching the men who had ambushed him ... if an am-bush in desert country was even possible.

Men? No.

The *boys* who had done this.

Latigo knew who they were, all right; he didn't know how they had gotten out here, but he knew who they were, and their run would stop right here, east of the woods and rising hills.

*"Hendricks!"* he bawled. Hendricks had at least managed to hold his men—half a dozen of them, all mounted—near the *remuda*. *"Hendricks, to me!"*

As Hendricks rode toward him, Latigo spun the other way and saw a huddle of men standing and watching the burning tankers. Their gaping mouths and stupid young sheep faces made him feel like screaming and dancing up and down, but he refused to give in to that. He held a narrow beam of concentration, one aimed directly at the raiders, who must not under any circumstances be allowed to escape.

*"You!"* he shouted at the men. One of them turned; the others did not. Latigo strode to them, drawing his pistol as he went. He slapped it into the hand of the man who had turned toward the sound of his voice, and pointed at random to one of those who had not. "Shoot that fool."

Dazed, his face that of a man who believes he is dreaming, the soldier raised the pistol and shot the man to whom Latigo had pointed. That un-lucky fellow went down in a heap of knees and elbows and twitching hands. The others turned.

"Good," Latigo said, taking his gun back.

*"Sir!"* Hendricks cried. *"I see them, sir! I have the enemy in clear view!"*



Two more tankers exploded. A few whickering shards of steel flew in their direction. Some of the men ducked; Latigo did not so much as twitch. Nor did Hendricks. A good man. Thank God for at least one such in this nightmare.

*"Shall I hie after them, sir? "*

"I'll take your men and hie after them myself, Hendricks. Mount these hoss-guts before us." He swept an arm at the standing men, whose doltish attention had been diverted from the burning tankers to their dead comrade. "Pull in as many others as you can. Do you have a bugler?"

"Yes, sir, Raines, sir!" Hendricks looked around, beckoned, and a pimply, scared-looking boy rode forward. A dented bugle on a frayed strap hung askew on the front of his shirt.

"Raines," Latigo said, "you're with Hendricks."

"Yes, sir."

"Get as many men as you can, Hendricks, but don't linger over the job. They're headed for that canyon, and I believe someone told me it's a box. If so, we're going to turn it into a shooting gallery."

Hendricks's lips spread in a twisted grin. "Yes, sir."

Behind them, the tankers continued to explode.

## 17

Roland glanced back and was astonished by the size of the black, smoky column rising into the air. Ahead he could clearly see the brush blocking most of the canyon's mouth. And although the wind was blowing the wrong way, he could now hear the maddening mosquito-whine of the thinny.

He patted the air with his outstretched hands, signalling for Cuthbert and Alain to slow down. While they were both still looking at him, he took off his bandanna, whipped it into a rope, and tied it so it would cover his ears. They copied him. It was better than nothing.

The gunslingers continued west, their shadows now running out behind them as long as gantries on the desert floor. Looking back, Roland could see two groups of riders streaming in pursuit. Latigo was at the head of the first, Roland thought, and he was deliberately holding his riders back a little, so that the two groups could merge and attack together.

*Good*, he thought.

The three of them rode toward Eyebolt in a tight line, continuing to hold their own horses in, allowing their pursuers to close the distance. Every now and then another thud smote the air and shivered through the ground as one of the remaining tankers blew up. Roland was amazed at how easy it had been—even after the battle with Jonas and Lengyll, which should have put the men out here on their mettle, it had been easy. It made him think of a Reaptide long ago, he and Cuthbert surely no more than seven years old, running along a line of stuffy-guys with sticks, knocking them over one after the other, bang-bang-bangety-bang. The sound of the thinny was warbling its way into his brain in spite of the bandanna over his ears, making his eyes water. Behind him, he could hear the whoops and shouts of the pursuing men. It delighted him. Latigo's men had counted the odds—two dozen against three, with many more of their own force riding hard to join the battle—and their peckers were up once more. Roland faced front and pointed Rusher at the slit in the brush marking the entrance to Eyebolt Canyon.



## 18

Hendricks fell in beside Latigo, breathing hard, cheeks glaring with color. "Sir! Beg to report!"

"Then do it."

"I have twenty men, and there are p'raps three times that number rid-ing hard to join us."

Latigo ignored all of this. His eyes were bright blue flecks of ice. Un-der his mustache was a small, greedy smile. "Rodney," he said, speaking Hendricks's first name almost with the caress of a lover.

"Sir?"

"I think they're going in, Rodney. Yes . . . look. I'm sure of it. Two more minutes and it'll be too late for them to turn back." He raised his gun, laid the muzzle across his forearm, and threw a shot at the three riders ahead, mostly in exuberance.

"Yes, sir, very good, sir." Hendricks turned and waved viciously for his men to close up, close up.

## 19

*"Dismount!"* Roland shouted when they reached the line of tangled brush. It had a smell that was at once dry and oily, like a fire waiting to happen. He didn't know if their failure to ride their horses into the canyon would put Latigo's wind up or not, and he didn't care. These were good mounts, fine Gilead stock, and over these last months, Rusher had become his friend. He would not take him or any of the horses into the canyon, where they would be caught between the fire and the thinny.

The boys were off the horses in a flash, Alain pulling the drawstring bag free of his saddle-horn and slinging it over one shoulder. Cuthbert's and Alain's horses ran at once, whinnying, parallel to the brush, but Rusher lingered for a moment, looking at Roland. "Go on." Roland slapped him on the flank. "Run."

Rusher ran, tail streaming out behind him. Cuthbert and Alain slipped through the break in the brush. Roland followed, glancing down to make sure that the powder-trail was still there. It was, and still dry—there had been not a drop of rain since the day they'd laid it.

"Cuthbert," he said. "Matches."

Cuthbert gave him some. He was grinning so hard it was a wonder they hadn't fallen out of his mouth. "We warmed up their day, didn't we, Roland? Aye!"

"We did, indeed," Roland said, grinning himself. "Go on, now. Back to that chimney-cut."

"Let me do it," Cuthbert said. "Please, Roland, you go with Alain and let me stay. I'm a firebug at heart, always have been."

"No," Roland said. "This part of it's mine. Don't argue with me. Go on. And tell Alain to mind the wizard's glass, no matter what."

Cuthbert looked at him for a moment longer, then nodded. "Don't wait too long."

"I won't."

"May your luck rise, Roland."

"May yours rise twice."

Cuthbert hurried away, boots rattling on the loose stone which carpeted the floor of the canyon. He reached Alain, who lifted a hand to Roland. Roland nodded back, then ducked as a bullet snapped close enough to his temple to flick his hatbrim.

He crouched to the left of the opening in the brush and peered around, the wind now striking full in his face. Latigo's men were closing rapidly. More rapidly than he had expected. If the wind blew out the lucifers—

*Never mind the ifs. Hold on, Roland. . . hold on... wait for them. . .*

He held on, hunkering with an unlit match in each hand, now peering out through a tangle of interlaced branches. The smell of mesquite was strong in his nostrils. Not far behind it was the reek of burning oil. The drone of the thinny filled his head, making him feel dizzy, a stranger to himself. He thought of how it had been inside the pink storm, flying through the air ... how he had been snatched away from his vision of Su-san. *Thank God for Sheemie*, he thought distantly. *He'll make sure she finishes the day someplace safe.* But the craven whine of the thinny seemed somehow to mock him, to ask him if there had been more to see.

Now Latigo and his men were crossing the last three hundred yards to the canyon's mouth at a full-out gallop, the ones behind closing up fast. It would be hard for the ones riding point to stop suddenly without the risk of being ridden down.

It was time. Roland stuck one of the lucifers between his front teeth and raked it forward. It lit, spilling one hot and sour spark onto the wet bed of his tongue. Before the lucifer's head could bum away, Roland touched it to the powder in the trench. It lit at once, running left beneath the north end of the brush in a bright yellow thread.

He lunged across the opening—which might be wide enough for two horses running flank to flank—with the second lucifer already poised behind his teeth. He struck it as soon as he was somewhat blocked from the wind, dropped it into the powder, heard the splutter-hiss, then turned and ran.

*Mother and father*, was Roland's first shocked thought—memory so deep and unexpected it was like a slap. *At Lake Saroni.*

When had they gone there, to beautiful Lake Saroni in the northern part of Gilead Barony? That Roland couldn't remember. He knew only that he had been very small, and that there had been a beautiful stretch of sandy beach for him to play on, perfect for an aspiring young castle-builder such as he. That was what he had been doing on one day of their

*(vacation? was it a vacation? did my parents once upon a time actu-ally take a vacation?)*

trip, and he had looked up, something—maybe only the cries of the birds circling over the lake—had made him look up, and there were his mother and father, Steven and Gabrielle Deschain, at the water's edge, standing with their backs to him and their arms around each other's waists, looking out at blue water beneath a blue summer sky. How his heart had filled with love for them! How infinite was love, twining in and out of hope and memory like a braid with three strong strands, so much the Bright Tower of every human's life and soul.

It wasn't love he felt now, however, but terror. The figures standing before him as he ran back to where the canyon ended (where the *rational* part of the canyon ended) weren't Steven of Gilead and Gabrielle of Arten but his mollies, Cuthbert and Alain. They didn't have their arms around each other's waists, either, but their hands were clasped, like the hands of fairy-tale children lost in a threatening fairy-tale wood. Birds circled, but they were vultures, not gulls, and the shimmering, mist-topped stuff before the two boys wasn't water.

It was the thinny, and as Roland watched, Cuthbert and Alain began to walk toward it.

*"Stop!"* he screamed. *"For your fathers' sakes, stop!"*

They did not stop. They walked hand-in-hand toward the white-edged hem of the smoky green shimmer. The thinny whined its pleasure, mur-mured endearments, promised rewards. It baked the nerves numb and picked at the brain.

There was no time to reach them, so Roland did the only thing he could think of: raised one of his guns and fired it over their heads. The re-port was a hammer-blow in the canyon's enclosure, and for a moment the ricochet whine was louder than that of the thinny. The two boys stopped only inches from its sick shimmer. Roland kept expecting it to reach out and grab them, as it had grabbed the low-

flying bird when they had been here on the night of the Peddler's Moon. He triggered two more shots into the air, the reports hitting the walls and rolling back. "*Gunslingers!*" he cried. "*To me! To me!*"

It was Alain who turned toward him first, his dazed eyes seeming to float in his dust-streaked face. Cuthbert continued forward another step, the tips of his boots disappearing in the greenish-silver froth at the edge of the thinny (the whingeing grumble of the thing rose half a note, as if in anticipation), and then Alain yanked him back by the tugstring of his *som-brero*. Cuthbert tripped over a good-sized chunk of fallen rock and landed hard. When he looked up, his eyes had cleared. "Gods!" he murmured, and as he scrambled to his feet, Roland saw that the toes of his boots were gone, clipped off neatly, as if with a pair of gardening shears. His great toes stuck out.

"Roland," he gasped as he and Alain stumbled toward him. "Roland, we were almost gone. It *talks!*"

"Yes. I've heard it. Come on. There's no time."

He led them to the notch in the canyon wall, praying that they could get up quick enough to avoid being riddled with bullets ... as they certainly would be, if Latigo arrived before they could get up at least part of the way.

A smell, acrid and bitter, began to fill the air—an odor like boiling juniper berries. And the first tendrils of whitish-gray smoke drifted past them.

"Cuthbert, you first. Alain, you next. I'll come last. Climb fast, boys. Climb for your lives."

## 21

Latigo's men poured through the slot in the wall of brush like water pouring into a funnel, gradually widening the gap as they came. The bottom layer of the dead vegetation was already on fire, but in their excitement none of them saw these first low flames, or marked them if they did. The pungent smoke also went unnoticed; their noses had been deadened by the colossal stench of the burning oil. Latigo himself, in the lead with Hendricks close behind, had only one thought; two words that pounded at his brain in a kind of vicious triumph: *Box canyon! Box canyon! Box canyon!*

Yet something began to intrude on this mantra as he galloped deeper into Eyebolt,

his horse's hooves clattering nimbly through the scree of rocks and  
(*bones*)

whitish piles of cow-skulls and ribcages. This was a kind of low buzzing, a maddening, slobbering whine, insectile and insistent. It made his eyes water. Yet, strong as the sound was (if it *was* a sound; it almost seemed to be coming from *inside* him), he pushed it aside, holding onto his mantra

(*box canyon box canyon got em in a box canyon*)

instead. He would have to face Walter when this was over, perhaps Farson himself, and he had no idea what his punishment would be for los-ing the tankers ... but all that was for later. Now he wanted only to kill these interfering bastards.

Up ahead, the canyon took a jog to the north. They would be beyond that point, and probably not far beyond, either. Backed up against the canyon's final wall, trying to squeeze themselves behind what fallen rocks there might be. Latigo would mass what guns he had and drive them out into the open with ricochets. They would probably come with their hands up, hoping for mercy. They would hope in vain. After what they'd done, the trouble they'd caused—

As Latigo rode around the jog in the canyon's wall, already levelling his pistol, his horse screamed—like a woman, it screamed—and reared beneath him. Latigo caught the saddle-horn and managed to stay up, but the horse's rear hooves slid sideways in the scree and the animal went down. Latigo let go of the horn and threw himself clear, already aware that the sound which had been creeping into his ears was suddenly ten times stronger, buzzing loud enough to make his eyeballs pulse in their sockets, loud enough to make his balls tingle unpleasantly, loud enough to blot out the mantra which had been beating so insistently in his head. The insistence of the thinny was far, far greater than any George Latigo could have managed.

Horses flashed around him as he landed in a kind of sprawling squat, horses that were shoved forward willy-nilly by the oncoming press from behind, by riders that squeezed through the gap in pairs (then trios as the hole in the brush, now burning all along its length, widened) and then spread out again once they were past the bottleneck, none of them clearly realizing that the entire *canyon* was a bottleneck. Latigo got a confused glimpse of black tails and gray forelegs and dappled fetlocks; he saw chaps, and jeans, and boots jammed into stir-rups. He tried to get up and a horseshoe clanged against the back of his skull. His hat saved him from



unconsciousness, but he went heavily to his knees with his head down, like a man who means to pray, his vision full of stars and the back of his neck instantly soaked with blood from the gash the passing hoof had opened in his scalp. Now he heard more screaming horses. Screaming men, as well. He got up again, coughing out the dust raised by the passing horses (such acrid dust, too; it clawed his throat like smoke), and saw Hendricks trying to spur his horse south and east against the oncoming tide of riders. He couldn't do it. The rear third of the canyon was some sort of swamp, filled with greenish steaming water, and there must be quicksand beneath it, be-cause Hendricks's horse seemed stuck. It screamed again, and tried to rear. Its hindquarters slewed sideways. Hendricks crashed his boots into the animal's sides again and again, attempting to get it in motion, but the horse didn't—or couldn't—move. That hungry buzzing sound filled Latigo's ears, and seemed to fill the world.

"Back! Turn back!"

He tried to scream the words, but they came out in what was little more than a croak. Still the riders pounded past him, raising dust that was too thick to be *only* dust. Latigo pulled in breath so he could scream louder—they *had* to go back, something was dreadfully wrong in Eyebolt Canyon—and hacked it out without saying anything.

Screaming horses.

Reeking smoke.

And everywhere, filling the world like lunacy, that whining, whingeing, cringing buzz.

Hendricks's horse went down, eyes rolling, bit-parted teeth snapping at the smoky air and splattering curds of foam from its lips. Hendricks fell into the steaming stagnant water, and it wasn't water at all. It came alive, somehow, as he struck it; grew green hands and a green, shifty mouth; pawed his cheek and melted away the flesh, pawed his nose and tore it off, pawed at his eyes and stripped them from their sockets. It pulled Hendricks under, but before it did, Latigo saw his denuded jawbone, a bloody piston to drive his screaming teeth.

Other men saw, and tried to wheel away from the green trap. Those who managed to do so in time were broadsided by the next wave of men—some of whom were, incredibly, still yipping or bellowing full-throated battle cries. More horses and riders were driven into the green shimmer, which accepted them eagerly. Latigo,

standing stunned and bleeding like a man in the middle of a stampede (which was exactly what he was), saw the soldier to whom he had given his gun. This fellow, who had obeyed Latigo's order and shot one of his *compadres* in order to awaken the rest of them, threw himself from his saddle, howling, and crawled back from the edge of the green stuff even as his horse plunged in. He tried to get to his feet, saw two riders bearing down on him, and clapped his hands across his face. A moment later he was ridden down.

The shrieks of the wounded and dying echoed in the smoky canyon, but Latigo hardly heard them. What he heard mostly was that buzzing, a sound that was almost a voice. Inviting him to jump in. To end it here. Why not? It was over, wasn't it? All over.

He struggled away instead, and was now able to make some head-way; the stream of riders packing its way into the canyon was easing. Some of the riders fifty or sixty yards back from the jog had even been able to turn their horses. But these were ghostly and confused in the thick-ening smoke.

*The cunning bastards have set the brush on fire behind us. Gods of heaven, gods of earth, I think we 're trapped in here.*

He could give no commands—every time he drew in breath to try, he coughed it wordlessly back out again—but he was able to grab a passing rider who looked all of seventeen and yank him out of his saddle. The boy went down headfirst and smashed his brow open on a jutting chunk of rock. Latigo was mounted in his place before the kid's feet had stopped twitching.

He jerked the horse's head around and spurred for the front of the canyon, but the smoke thickened to a choking white cloud before he got more than twenty yards. The wind was driving it this way. Latigo could make out—barely—the shifting orange glare of the burning brush at the desert end.

He wheeled his new horse back the way it had come. More horses loomed out of the fog. Latigo crashed into one of them and was thrown for the second time in five minutes. He landed on his knees, scrambled to his feet, and staggered back downwind, coughing and retching, eyes red and streaming.

It was a little better beyond the canyon's northward jog, but wouldn't be for much longer. The edge of the thinny was a tangle of milling horses, many with broken legs, and crawling, shrieking men. Latigo saw several hats floating on the greenish surface of the whining organism that filled the back of the canyon; he

saw boots; he saw wristlets; he saw neckerchiefs; he saw the bugle-boy's dented instrument, still trailing its frayed strap.

*Come in*, the green shimmer invited, and Latigo found its buzz strangely attractive ... intimate, almost. *Come in and visit, squat and hun-ker, be at rest, be at peace, be at one.*

Latigo raised his gun, meaning to shoot it. He didn't believe it could be killed, but he would remember the face of his father and go down shooting, all the same. Except he didn't. The gun dropped from his relaxing fingers and he walked forward—others around him were now doing the same—into the thinny. The buzzing rose and rose, filling his ears until there was noth-ing else. Nothing else at all.

## 22

They saw it all from the notch, where Roland and his friends had stopped in a strung-out line about twenty feet below the top. They saw the scream-ing confusion, the panicky milling, the men who were trampled, the men and horses that were driven into the thinny ... and the men who, at the end, walked willingly into it.

Cuthbert was closest to the top of the canyon's wall, then Alain, then Roland, standing on a six-inch shelf of rock and holding an outcrop just above him. From their vantage-point they could see what the men strug-gling in their smoky hell below them could not: that the thinny was grow-ing, reaching out, crawling eagerly toward them like an incoming tide.

Roland, his battle-lust slaked, did not want to watch what was happening below, but he couldn't turn away. The whine of the thinny— cowardly and triumphant at the same time, happy and sad at the same time, lost and found at the same time—held him like sweet, sticky ropes. He hung where he was, hypnotized, as did his friends above him, even when the smoke began to rise, and its pungent tang made him cough dryly.

Men shrieked their lives away in the thickening smoke below. They struggled in it like phantoms. They faded as the fog thickened, climbing the canyon walls like water. Horses whinnied desperately from beneath that acrid white death. The wind swirled its surface in prankish whirl-pools. The thinny buzzed, and above where it

lay, the surface of the smoke was stained a mystic shade of palest green. Then, at long last, John Farson's men screamed no more. *We killed them*, Roland thought with a kind of sick and fascinated horror. Then: *No, not we. I. I killed them.*

How long he might have stayed there Roland didn't know—perhaps until the rising smoke engulfed him as well, but then Cuthbert, who had begun to climb again, called down three words from above him; called down in a tone of surprise and dismay. "Roland! *The moon!*"

Roland looked up, startled, and saw that the sky had darkened to a velvety purple. His friend was outlined against it and looking east, his face stained fever-orange with the light of the rising moon.

*Yes, orange*, the thinny buzzed inside his head. *Laughed* inside his head. *Orange as 'twas when it rose on the night you came out here to see me and count me. Orange like afire. Orange like a bonfire.*

*How can it be almost dark?* he cried inside himself, but he knew—yes, he knew very well. Time had slipped back together, that was all, like layers of ground embracing once more after the argument of an earthquake. Twilight had come. *Moonrise* had come.

Terror struck Roland like a closed fist aimed at the heart, making him jerk backward on the small ledge he'd found. He groped for the horn-shaped outcrop above him, but that act of rebalancing was far away; most of him was inside the pink storm again, before he had been snatched away and shown half the cosmos. Perhaps the wizard's glass had only shown him what stood worlds far away in order to keep from showing him what might soon befall so close to home.

*I'd turn around if I thought her life was in any real danger*, he had said. *In a second.*

And if the ball knew that? If it couldn't lie, might it not misdirect? Might it not take him away and show him a dark land, a darker tower? And it had shown him something else, something that recurred to him only now: a scrawny man in farmer's overalls who had said. . . what? Not quite what he'd thought, not what he had been used to hearing all his life; not *Life for you and life for your crop*, but. . . "Death," he whispered to the stones surrounding him. "Death for you, life for my crop. *Charyou tree*. That's what he said, *Charyou tree*. Come, Reap."

*Orange, gunslinger*, a cracked old voice laughed inside his head. The voice of the

Coos. *The color of bonfires. Charyou tree, fin de ano, these are the old ways of which only the stuffy-guys with their red hands re-main . . . until tonight. Tonight the old ways are refreshed, as the old ways must be, from time to time. Charyou tree, you damned babby, Charyou tree: tonight you pay for my sweet Ermot. Tonight you pay for all. Come, Reap.*

"Climb!" he screamed, reaching up and slapping Alain's behind. "Climb, climb! For your father's sake, *climb!*"

"Roland, what—?" Alain's voice was dazed, but he did begin to climb, going from handhold to handhold and rattling small pebbles down into Roland's upturned face. Squinting against their fall, Roland reached and swatted Al's bottom again, driving him like a horse.

"*Climb, gods damn you!*" he cried. "It mayn't be too late, even now!"

But he knew better. Demon Moon had risen, he had seen its orange light shining on Cuthbert's face like delirium, and he knew better. In his head the lunatic buzz of the thinny, that rotting sore eating through the flesh of reality, joined with the lunatic laughter of the witch, and he knew better.

*Death for you, life for the crop. Charyou tree.*

*Oh, Susan—*

## 23

Nothing was clear to Susan until she saw the man with the long red hair and the straw hat which did not quite obscure his lamb-slaughterer's eyes; the man with the cornshucks in his hands. He was the first, just a farmer (she had glimpsed him in the Lower Market, she thought; had even nod-ded to him, as countryfolk do, and he back to her), standing by himself not far from the place where Silk Ranch Road and the Great Road inter-sected, standing in the light of the rising moon. Until they came upon him, nothing was clear; after he hurled his bundle of cornshucks at her as she passed, standing in the slowly rolling cart with her hands bound in front of her and her head lowered and a rope around her neck, everything was clear.

"*Charyou tree,* " he called, almost sweetly uttering words of the Old People she hadn't heard since her childhood, words that meant "Come, Reap" . . . and something else, as well. Something hidden, something se-cret, something to do

with that root word, *char*, that word which meant only death. As the dried shucks fluttered around her boots, she understood the secret very well; understood also that there would be no baby for her, no wedding for her in the fairy-distant land of Gilead, no hall in which she and Roland would be joined and then saluted beneath the electric lights, no husband, no more nights of sweet love; all that was over. The world had moved on and all that was over, done before fairly begun. She knew that she had been put in the back of the cart, *stood* in the back of the cart, and that the surviving Coffin Hunter had looped a noose around her neck. "Don't try to sit," he had said, sounding almost apologetic. "I have no desire to choke you, girly. If the wagon bumps and you fall, I'll try to keep the knot loose, but if you try to sit, I'll have to give you a pinching. *Her* orders." He nodded to Rhea, who sat erect on the seat of the cart, the reins in her warped hands. "*She's* in charge now."

And so she had been; so, as they neared town, she still was. Whatever the possession of her glam had done to her body, whatever the loss of it had done to her mind, it had not broken her power; that seemed to have increased, if anything, as if she'd found some other source from which she could feed, at least for awhile. Men who could have broken her over one knee like a stick of kindling followed her commands as unquestioningly as children.

There were more and more men as that Reaping afternoon wound its shallow course to night: half a dozen ahead of the cart, riding with Rimer and the man with the cocked eye, a full dozen riding behind it with Reynolds, the rope leading to her neck wound around his tattooed hand, at their head. She didn't know who these men were, or how they had been summoned.

Rhea had taken this rapidly increasing party north a little farther, then turned southwest on the old Silk Ranch Road, which wound back toward town. On the eastern edge of Hambry, it rejoined the Great Road. Even in her dazed state, Susan had realized the harridan was moving slowly, measuring the descent of the sun as they went, not clucking at the pony to hurry but actually reining it in, at least until afternoon's gold had gone. When they passed the farmer, thin-faced and alone, a good man, no doubt, with a freehold farm he worked hard from first gleam to last glow and a family he loved (but oh, there were those lamb-slaughterer eyes below the brim of his battered hat), she understood this leisurely course of travel, too. Rhea had been waiting for the moon.

With no gods to pray to, Susan prayed to her father.

*Da? If thee's there, help me to be strong as lean be, and help me hold to him, to the memory of him. Help me to hold to myself as well. Not for rescue, not for salvation, but just so as not to give them the satisfaction of seeing my pain and my fear. And him, help him as well. . .*

"Help keep him safe," she whispered. "Keep my love safe; take my love safe to where he goes, give him joy in who he sees, and make him a cause of joy in those who see him."

"Praying, dearie?" the old woman asked without turning on the seat. Her croaking voice oozed false compassion. "Aye, ye'd do well t'make things right with the Powers while ye still can—before the spit's burned right out of yer throat!" She threw back her head and cackled, the strag-gling remains of her broomstraw hair flying out orange in the light of the bloated moon.

## 24

Their horses, led by Rusher, had come to the sound of Roland's dismayed shout. They stood not far away, their manes rippling in the wind, shaking their heads and whinnying their displeasure whenever the wind dropped enough for them to get a whiff of the thick white smoke rising from the canyon.

Roland paid no attention to the horses or the smoke. His eyes were fixed on the drawstring sack slung over Alain's shoulder. The ball inside had come alive again; in the growing dark, the bag seemed to pulse like some weird pink firefly. He held out his hands for it.

"Give it to me!"

"Roland, I don't know if—"

*"Give it to me, damn your face!"*

Alain looked at Cuthbert, who nodded . . . then lifted his hands sky-ward in a weary, distracted gesture.

Roland tore the bag away before Alain could do more than begin to shrug it off his shoulder. The gunslinger dipped into it and pulled the glass out. It was glowing fiercely, a pink Demon Moon instead of an orange one.

Behind and below them, the nagging whine of the thinny rose and fell, rose and fell.

"Don't look directly into that thing," Cuthbert muttered to Alain. "Don't, for your father's sake."

Roland bent his face over the pulsing ball, its light running over his cheeks and brow like liquid, drowning his eyes in its dazzle.

In Maerlyn's Rainbow he saw her—Susan, horse-drover's daughter, lovely girl at the window. He saw her standing in the back of a black cart decorated with gold symbols, the old witch's cart. Reynolds rode behind her, holding the end of a rope that was noosed around her neck. The cart was rolling toward Green Heart, making its way with processional slow-ness. Hill Street was lined with people of whom the farmer with the lamb-slaughterer's eyes had been only the first—all those folk of Hambry and Mejis who had been deprived of their fair but were now given this ancient dark attraction in its stead: *Charyou tree*, come, Reap, death for you, life for our crops.

A soundless whispering ran through them like a gathering wave, and they began to pelt her—first with cornhusks, then with rotting tomatoes, then with potatoes and apples. One of these latter struck her cheek. She reeled, almost fell, then stood straight again, now raising her swollen but still lovely face so the moon painted it. She looked straight ahead.

"*Charyou tree*, " they whispered. Roland couldn't hear them, but he could see the words on their lips. Stanley Ruiz was there, and Pettie, and Gert Moggins, and Frank Claypool, the deputy with the broken leg; Jamie McCann, who was to have been this year's Reap Lad. Roland saw a hundred people he had known (and mostly liked) during his time in Mejis. Now these people pelted his love with cornshucks and vegetables as she stood, hands bound before her, in the back of Rhea's cart.

The slowly rolling cart reached Green Heart, with its colored paper lanterns and silent carousel where no laughing children rode ... no, not this year. The crowd, still speaking those two words—*chanting* them now, it appeared—parted. Roland saw the heaped pyramid of wood that was the unlit bonfire. Sitting around it, their backs propped on the central column, their lumpy legs outstretched, was a ring of red-handed stuffy-guys. There was a single hole in the ring; a single waiting vacancy.

And now a woman emerged from the crowd. She wore a rusty black dress and held a pail in one hand. A smear of ash stood out on one of her cheeks like a



brand. She—

Roland began to shriek. It was a single word, over and over again:

*No, no, no, no, no, no!* The ball's pink light flashed brighter with each repetition, as if his horror refreshed and strengthened it. And now, with each of those pulses, Cuthbert and Alain could see the shape of the gunslinger's skull beneath his skin. "We have to take it away from him," Alain said. "We have to, it's sucking him dry. It's killing him!"

Cuthbert nodded and stepped forward. He grabbed the ball, but couldn't take it from Roland's hands. The gunslinger's fingers seemed welded to it.

"Hit him!" he told Alain. "Hit him again, you have to!"

But Alain might as well have been hitting a post. Roland didn't even rock back on his heels. He continued to cry out that single negative— "*No! No! No! No* "—and the ball flashed faster and faster, eating its way into him through the wound it had opened, sucking up his grief like blood.

## 25

*"Charyou tree!"* Cordelia Delgado cried, darting forward from where she had been waiting. The crowd cheered her, and beyond her left shoulder Demon Moon winked, as if in complicity. *"Charyou tree, ye faithless bitch! Charyou tree!"* She flung the pail of paint at her niece, splattering her pants and dressing her tied hands in a pair of wet scarlet gloves. She grinned up at Susan as the cart rolled past. The smear of ash stood out on her cheek; in the center of her pale forehead, a single vein pulsed like a worm.

*"Bitch!"* Cordelia screamed. Her fists were clenched; she danced a kind of hilarious jig, feet jumping, bony knees pumping beneath her skirt. *"Life for the crops! Death for the bitch! Charyou tree! Come, Reap!"*

The cart rolled past her; Cordelia faded from Susan's sight, just one more cruel phantasm in a dream that would soon end. *Bird and bear and hare and fish*, she thought. *Be safe, Roland; go with my love. That's my fondest wish.*

"Take her!" Rhea screamed. "Take this murdering bitch and cook her red-handed! *Charyou tree!*"

*"Charyou tree!"* the crowd responded. A forest of willing hands grew in the moonlit air; somewhere firecrackers rattled and children laughed excitedly.

Susan was lifted from the cart and handed toward the waiting wood-pile above the heads of the crowd, passed by uplifted hands like a heroine returned triumphantly home from the wars. Her hands dripped red tears upon their straining, eager faces. The moon overlooked it all, dwarfing the glow of the paper lanterns.

"Bird and bear and hare and fish," she murmured as she was first lowered and then slammed against the pyramid of dry wood, put in the place which had been left for her—the whole crowd chanting in unison now, "*Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE!*"

"Bird and bear and hare and fish."

Trying to remember how he had danced with her that night. Trying to remember how he had loved with her in the willow grove. Trying to remember that first meeting on the dark road: *Thankee-sai, we 're well met*, he had said, and yes, in spite of everything, in spite of this miserable ending with the folk who had been her neighbors turned into prancing goblins by moonlight, in spite of pain and betrayal and what was coming, he had spoken the truth: they had been well met, they had been very well met, indeed.

*"Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE!"*

Women came and piled dry cornshucks around her feet. Several of them slapped her (it didn't matter; her bruised and puffy face seemed to have gone numb), and one—it was Misha Alvarez, whose daughter Susan had taught to ride—spat into her eyes and then leaped prankishly away, shaking her hands at the sky and laughing. For a moment she saw Coral Thorin, festooned with reap-charms, her arms filled with dead leaves which she threw at Susan; they fluttered down around her in a crackling, aromatic shower.

And now came her aunt again, and Rhea beside her. Each held a torch. They stood before her, and Susan could smell sizzling pitch.

Rhea raised her torch to the moon. "*CHARYOU TREE!*" she screamed in her rusty old voice, and the crowd responded, "*CHARYOU TREE!*"

Cordelia raised her own torch. "*COME, REAP!*"

"*COME, REAP!*" they cried back to her.

"Now, ye bitch," Rhea crooned. "Now comes warmer kisses than any yer love ever gave ye."

"Die, ye faithless," Cordelia whispered. "Life for the crops, death for you."

It was she who first flung her torch into the cornshucks which were piled as high

as Susan's knees; Rhea flung hers a bare second later. The cornshucks blazed up at once, dazzling Susan with yellow light.

She drew in a final breath of cool air, warmed it with her heart, and loosed it in a defiant shout: "*ROLAND, I LOVE THEE!*"

The crowd fell back, murmuring, as if uneasy at what they had done, now that it was too late to take it back; here was not a stuffy-guy but a cheerful girl they all knew, one of their own, for some mad reason backed up against the Reap-Night bonfire with her hands painted red. They might have saved her, given another moment—some might have, anyway—but it was too late. The dry wood caught; her pants caught; her shirt caught; her long blonde hair blazed on her head like a crown.

*"ROLAND, I LOVE THEE!"*

At the end of her life she was aware of heat but not pain. She had time to consider his eyes, eyes of that blue which is the color of the sky at first light of morning. She had time to think of him on the Drop, riding Rusher flat-out with his black hair flying back from his temples and his necker-chief rippling; to see him laughing with an ease and freedom he would never find again in the long life which stretched out for him beyond hers, and it was his laughter she took with her as she went out, fleeing the light and heat into the silky, consoling dark, calling to him over and over as she went, calling bird and bear and hare and fish.

## 26

There was no word, not even *no*, in his screams at the end: he howled like a gutted animal, his hands welded to the ball, which beat like a runaway heart. He watched in it as she burned.

Cuthbert tried again to take the cursed thing away, and couldn't. He did the only other thing he could think of—drew his revolver, pointed it at the ball, and thumbed back the hammer. He would likely wound Roland, and the flying glass might even blind him, but there was no other choice. If they didn't do something, the glam would kill him.

But there was no need. As if seeing Cuthbert's gun and understanding what it meant, the ball went instantly dark and dead in Roland's hands. Roland's stiff body, every line and muscle trembling with horror and out-rage, went limp. He

dropped like a stone, his fingers at last letting go of the ball. His stomach cushioned it as he struck the ground; it rolled off him and trickled to a stop by one of his limp, outstretched hands. Nothing burned in its darkness now except for one baleful orange spark—the tiny reflection of the rising Demon Moon.

Alain looked at the glass with a species of disgusted, frightened awe; looked at it as one might look at a vicious animal that now sleeps ... but will wake again, and bite when it does.

He stepped forward, meaning to crush it to powder beneath his boot. "Don't you dare," Cuthbert said in a hoarse voice. He was kneeling beside Roland's limp form but looking at Alain. The rising moon was in his eyes, two small, bright stones of light. "Don't you dare, after all the misery and death we've gone through to get it. Don't you even *think* of it."

Alain looked at him uncertainly for a moment, thinking he should de-stroy the cursed thing, anyway—misery suffered did not justify misery to come, and as long as the thing on the ground remained whole, misery was all it would bring anyone. It was a *misery-machine*, that was what it was, and it had killed Susan Delgado. He hadn't seen what Roland had seen in the glass, but he had seen his friend's face, and that had been enough. It had killed Susan, and it would kill more, if left whole.

But then he thought of *ka* and drew back. Later he would bitterly re-gret doing so. "Put it in the bag again," Cuthbert said, "and then help me with Roland. We have to get out of here."

The drawstring bag lay crumpled on the ground nearby, fluttering in the wind. Alain picked up the ball, hating the feel of its smooth, curved surface, expecting it to come alive under his touch. It didn't, though. He put it in the bag, and looped it over his shoulder again. Then he knelt be-side Roland.

He didn't know how long they tried unsuccessfully to bring him around—until the moon had risen high enough in the sky to turn silver again, and the smoke roiling out of the canyon had begun to dissipate, that was all he knew. Until Cuthbert told him it was enough; they would have to sling him over Rusher's saddle and ride with him that way. If they could get into the heavily forested lands west o' Barony before dawn, Cuthbert said, they would likely be safe . . . but they had to get at least that far. They had smashed Parson's men apart with stunning ease, but the remains would likely knit together again the following day. Best they be gone

before that happened.

And that was how they left Eyebolt Canyon, and the seacoast side of Mejis; riding west beneath the Demon Moon, with Roland laid across his saddle like a corpse.

## 27

The next day they spent in II Bosque, the forest west of Mejis, waiting for Roland to wake up. When afternoon came and he remained unconscious, Cuthbert said:

"See if you can touch him."

Alain took Roland's hands in his own, marshalled all his concentration, bent over his friend's pale, slumbering face, and remained that way for almost half an hour. Finally he shook his head, let go of Roland's hands, and stood up.

"Nothing?" Cuthbert asked.

Alain sighed and shook his head.

They made a travois of pine branches so he wouldn't have to spend another night riding oversaddle (if nothing else, it seemed to make Rusher nervous to be carrying his master in such a way), and went on, not traveling on the Great Road—that would have been far too dangerous—but parallel to it. When Roland remained unconscious the following day (Mejis falling behind them now, and both boys feeling a deep tug of homesickness, inexplicable but as real as tides), they sat on either side of him, looking at each other over the slow rise and fall of his chest.

"Can an unconscious person starve, or die of thirst?" Cuthbert asked. "They can't, can they?"

"Yes," Alain said. "I think they can."

It had been a long, nerve-wracking night of travel. Neither boy had slept well the previous day, but on this one they slept like the dead, with blankets over their heads to block the sun. They awoke minutes apart as the sun was going down and Demon Moon, now two nights past the full, was rising through a troubled rack of clouds that presaged the first of the great autumn storms.

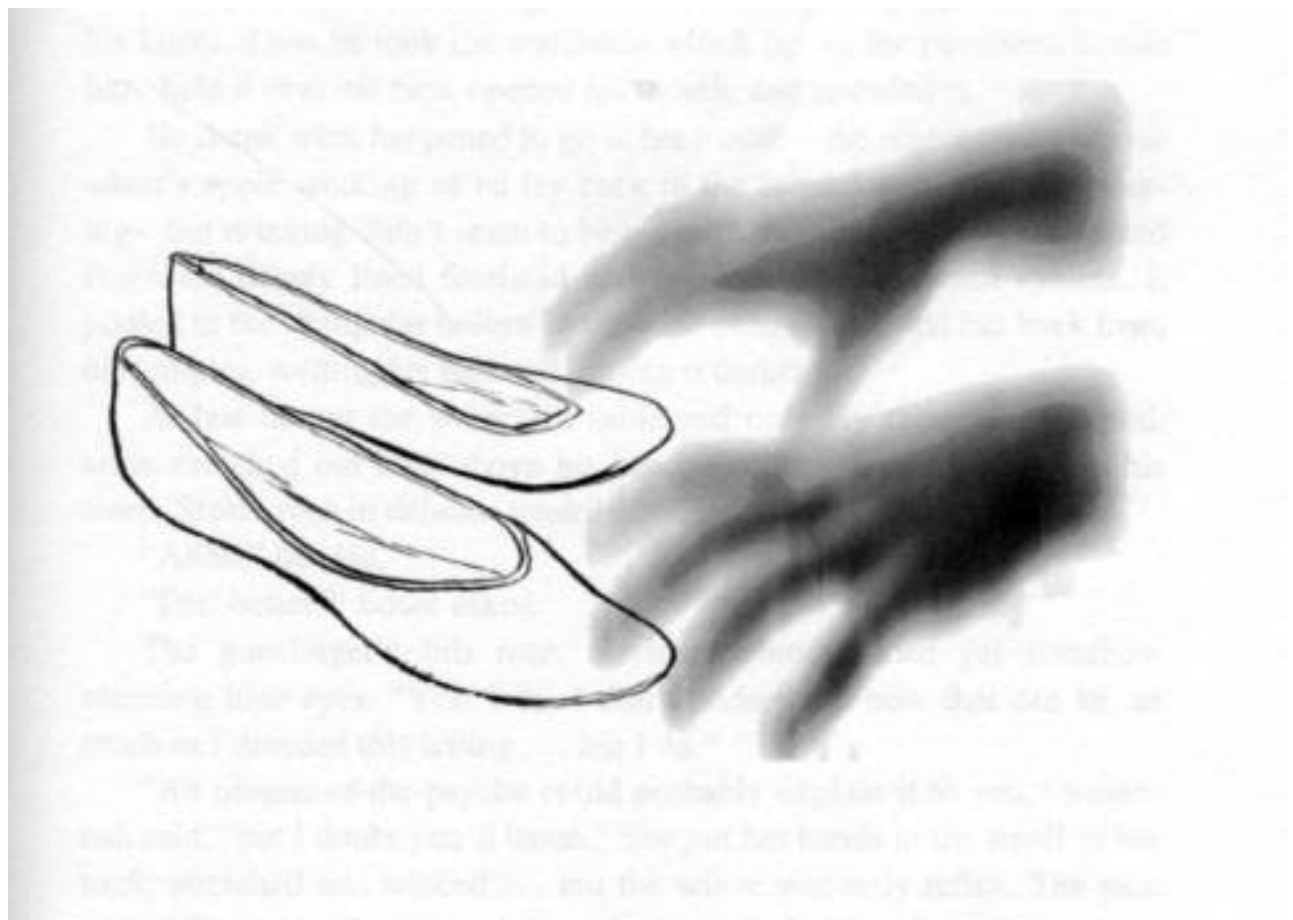
Roland was sitting up. He had taken the glass from the drawstring bag. He sat with it cradled in his arms, a darkened bit of magic as dead as the glass eyes of The Romp. Roland's own eyes, also dead, looked indifferently off into the moonlit corridors of the forest. He would eat but not sleep. He would drink from the

streams they passed but not speak. And he would not be parted from the piece of Maerlyn's Rainbow which they had brought out of Mejis at such great price. It did not glow for him, however. *Not, Cuthbert thought once, while Al and I are awake to see it, anyway.*

Alain couldn't get Roland's hands off the ball, and so he laid his own on Roland's cheeks, touching him that way. Except there was nothing to touch, nothing there. The thing which rode west with them toward Gilead was not Roland, or even a ghost of Roland. Like the moon at the close of its cycle, Roland had gone.

## **PART FOUR**

### **ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT SHOES**



# CHAPTER I

## KANSAS IN THE MORNING

1

For the first time in  
*(hours? days?)*

the gunslinger fell silent. He sat for a moment looking toward the building to the east of them (with the sun behind it, the glass palace was a black shape surrounded by a gold nimbus) with his forearms propped on his knees. Then he took the waterskin which lay on the pavement beside him, held it over his face, opened his mouth, and upended it.

He drank what happened to go in his mouth—the others could see his adam's apple working as he lay back in the breakdown lane, still pour-ing—but drinking didn't seem to be his primary purpose. Water streamed down his deeply lined forehead and bounced off his closed eyelids. It pooled in the triangular hollow at the base of his throat and ran back from his temples, wetting his hair and turning it darker.

At last he put the waterskin aside and only lay there, eyes closed, arms stretched out high above his head, like a man surrendering in his sleep. Steam rose in delicate tendrils from his wet face.

"Ahhh," he said.

"Feel better?" Eddie asked.

The gunslinger's lids rose, disclosing those faded yet somehow alarming blue eyes.

"Yes. I do. I don't understand how that can be, as much as I dreaded this telling . . . but I do."

"An ologist-of-the-psyche could probably explain it to you," Susan-nah said, "but I doubt you'd listen." She put her hands in the small of her back, stretched and winced ... but the wince was only reflex. The pain and stiffness she'd expected weren't there, and although there was one small creak near the base other spine, she didn't get the satisfying series of snaps, crackles, and pops she had expected.

"Tell you one thing," Eddie said, "this gives a whole new meaning to 'Get it off your chest.' How long have we been here, Roland?"

"Just one night."

" 'The spirits have done it all in a single night,' " Jake said in a dreamy voice. His legs were crossed at the ankles; Oy sat in the diamond shape made by the boy's bent knees, looking at him with his bright gold-black eyes.

Roland sat up, wiping at his wet cheeks with his neckerchief and looking at Jake sharply. "What is it you say?"

"Not me. A guy named Charles Dickens wrote that. In a story called *A Christmas Carol*. All in a single night, huh?"



"Does any part of your body say it was longer?"

Jake shook his head. No, he felt pretty much the way he did any morning—better than on some. He had to take a leak, but his back teeth weren't exactly floating, or anything like that.

"Eddie? Susannah?"

"I feel good," Susannah said. "Surely not as if I stayed up all night, let alone many of em."

Eddie said, "It reminds me of the time I spent as a junkie, in a way—"

"Doesn't everything?" Roland asked dryly.

"Oh, that's funny," Eddie said. "A real howl. Next train that goes crazy on us, *you* can ask it the silly questions. What I meant was that you'd spend so many nights high that you got used to feeling like ten pounds of shit in a nine-pound bag when you got up in the morning—bad head, stuffy nose, thumping heart, glass in the old spine. Take it from your pal Eddie, you can tell just from the way you feel in the morning how good dope is for you. Anyway, you'd get so used to that—/did, any-way—that when you actually took a night off, you'd wake up the next morning and sit there on the edge of the bed, thinking, 'What the flick's wrong with me? Am I sick? I feel weird. Did I have a stroke in the night?' "

Jake laughed, then clapped a hand over his mouth so violently that it was as if he wanted not just to hold the sound in but call it back. "Sorry," he said. "That made me think of my dad."

"One of my people, huh?" Eddie said. "Anyway, I expect to be sore, I expect to be tired, I expect to creak when I walk... but I actually think all I need to put me right is a quick pee in the bushes."

"And a bite to eat?" Roland asked.

Eddie had been wearing a ^small smile. Now it faded. "No," he said. "After that story, I'm not all that hungry. In fact, I'm not hungry at all."

## 2

Eddie carried Susannah down the embankment and popped her behind a stand of laurel bushes to do her necessary. Jake was sixty or seventy yards east, in a grove of birches. Roland had said he would use the remedial strip to do his morning necessary, then raised his eyebrows when his New York friends laughed.

Susannah wasn't laughing when she came out of the bushes. Her face was streaked with tears. Eddie didn't ask her; he knew. He had been fighting the feeling himself. He took her gently in his arms and she put her face against the side of his neck. They stayed that way for a little while.

"*Charyou tree*, " she said at last, pronouncing it as Roland had: chair-you tree, with a little upturned vowel at the end.

"Yeah," Eddie said, thinking that a Charlie by any other name was still a Charlie. As, he supposed, a rose was a rose was a rose. "Come, Reap."

She raised her head and began to wipe her swimming eyes. "To have gone through all that," she said, keeping her voice low ... and looking once at the turnpike embankment to make sure Roland wasn't there, looking down at them. "And *at fourteen*."

"Yeah. It makes my adventures searching for the elusive dime bag in Tompkins Square look pretty tame. In a way, though, I'm almost relieved."

"Relieved? Why?"

"Because I thought he was going to tell us that he killed her himself. For his damned Tower."

Susannah looked squarely into his eyes. "But he thinks that's what he did. Don't you understand that?"

### 3

When they were back together again and there was food actually in sight, all of them decided they could eat a bit, after all. Roland shared out the last of the burritos (*Maybe later today we can stop in at the nearest Boing Boing Burgers and see what they've got for leftovers*, Eddie thought), and they dug in. All of them, that was, except Roland. He picked up his burrito, looked at it, then looked away. Eddie saw an expression of sadness on the gunslinger's face that made him look both old and lost. It hurt Eddie's heart, but he couldn't think what to do about it.

Jake, almost ten years younger, could. He got up, went to Roland, knelt beside him, put his arms around the gunslinger's neck, and hugged him. "I'm sorry you lost your friend," he said.

Roland's face worked, and for a moment Eddie was sure he was going to lose it.

A long time between hugs, maybe. Mighty long. Eddie had to look away for a moment. *Kansas in the morning*, he told himself. *A sight you never expected to see. Dig on that for awhile, and let the man be.*

When he looked back, Roland had it together again. Jake was sitting beside him, and Oy had his long snout on one of the gunslinger's boots. Roland had begun to eat his burrito. Slowly, and without much relish . . . but he was eating.

A cold hand—Susannah's—crept into Eddie's. He took it and folded his fingers over it.

"One night," she marvelled.

"On our body-clocks, at least," Eddie said. "In our heads . . ."

"Who knows?" Roland agreed. "But storytelling always changes time. At least it does in my world." He smiled. It was unexpected, as al-ways, and as always, it transformed his face into something nearly beauti-ful. Looking at that, Eddie mused, you could see how a girl might have fallen in love with Roland, once upon a time. Back when he had been long and going on tall but maybe not so ugly; back when the Tower hadn't yet got its best hold on him.

"I think it's that way in all worlds, sugar," Susannah said. "Could I ask you a couple of questions, before we get rolling?"

"If you like."

"What happened to you? How long were you ... gone?"

"I was certainly gone, you're right about that. I was travelling. *Wan-dering*. Not in Maerlyn's Rainbow, exactly ... I don't think I ever would have returned from there, if I'd gone into it while I was still . . . sick . . . but everyone has a wizard's glass, of course. Here." He tapped his fore-head gravely, just above the space between his eyebrows. "That's where I went. That's where I travelled while my friends travelled east with me. I got better there, little by little. I held onto the ball, and I travelled inside my head, and I got better. But the glass never glowed for me until the very end ... when the battlements of the castle and the towers of the city were actually in sight. If it had awakened earlier..."

He shrugged.

"If it had awakened before I'd started to get some of my strength of mind back, I don't think I'd be here now. Because any world—even a pink one with a glass sky—would have been preferable to one where there was no Susan. I suppose the force that gives the glass its life knew that... and waited."

"But when it *did* glow for you again, it told you the rest," Jake said. "It must have. It told you the parts that you weren't there to see."

"Yes. I know as much of the story as I do because of what I saw in the ball."

"You told us once that John Farson wanted your head on a pole," Ed-die said.

"Because you stole something from him. Something he held dear. It was the glass ball, wasn't it?"

"Yes. He was more than furious when he found out. He was insane with rage. In your parlance, Eddie, he 'went nuclear.' "

"How many more times *did* it glow for you?" Susannah asked.

"And what happened to it?" Jake added.

"I saw in it three times after we left Mejis Barony," Roland said. "The first was on the night before we came home to Gilead. That was when I travelled in it the longest, and it showed me what I've told you. A few things I've only guessed at, but most I was shown. It showed me these things not to teach or enlighten, but to hurt and wound. The remaining pieces of the Wizard's Rainbow are all evil things. Hurt enlivens them, somehow. It waited until my mind was strong enough to understand and *withstand*... and then it showed me all the things I missed in my stu-pid adolescent complacency. My lovesick daze. My prideful, murderous conceit."

"Roland, don't," Susannah said. "Don't let it hurt you still."

"But it does. It always will. Never mind. It doesn't matter now; that tale is told.

"The second time I saw into the glass—*went* into the glass—was three days after I came home. My mother wasn't there, although she was due that evening. She had gone into Debaria—a kind of retreat for women—to wait and pray for my return. Nor was Marten there. He was in Cressia, with Farson."

"The ball," Eddie said. "Your father had it by then?"

"No-o," Roland said. He looked down at his hands, and Eddie observed a faint flush rising into his cheeks. "I didn't give it to him at first. I found it... hard to give up."

"I bet," Susannah said. "You and everyone else who ever looked into the goddam thing."

"On the third afternoon, before we were to be banqueted to celebrate our safe return"

"I bet you were really in a mood to party, too," Eddie said.

Roland smiled without humor, still studying his hands. "At around four o' the clock, Cuthbert and Alain came to my rooms. We were a trio for an artist to paint, I wot—windburned, hollow-eyed, hands covered with healing cuts and scrapes from our climb up the side of the canyon, scrawny as scarecrows. Even Alain, who tended toward stoutness, all but disappeared when he turned sideways. They confronted me, I suppose you'd say. They'd kept the secret of the ball to that point—out of respect for me and for the loss I'd suffered, they told me, and I believed them—but they would keep it no longer than that night's meal. If I wouldn't give it up voluntarily, it would be a question for our fathers to decide. They were horribly embarrassed, especially Cuthbert, but they were determined. "I told them I'd give it over to my own father before the banquet—before my mother arrived by coach from Debaria, even. They should come early and see that I kept my promise. Cuthbert started to hem and haw and say that wouldn't be necessary, but of course it *was* necessary—"

"Yeah," Eddie said. He had the look of a man who understood this part of the story perfectly. "You can go into the crapper on your own, but it's a lot easier to actually flush all the bad shit down the toilet if you have somebody with you."

"Alain, at least, knew it would be better for me—easier—if I didn't have to hand the ball over alone. He hushed Cuthbert up and said they'd be there. And they were. And I gave it over, little as I wanted to. My father went as pale as paper when he looked into the bag and saw what was there, then excused himself and took it away. When he came back, he picked up his glass of wine and went on talking to us of our adventures in Mejis as if nothing had happened."

"But between the time your friends talked to you about it and the time you gave it up, you looked into it," Jake said. "*Went* into it. Travelled in it. What did it show you that time?"

"First the Tower again," Roland said, "and the beginning of the way there. I saw the fall of Gilead, and the triumph of the Good Man. We'd put those things back a mere twenty months or so by destroying the tankers and the oilpatch. I could do nothing about that, but it showed me something I *could* do. There was a certain knife. The blade had been treated with an especially potent poison, something from a distant Mid-World Kingdom called Garlan. Stuff so strong even the tiniest cut would cause almost instant death. A wandering singer—in truth, John Parson's eldest nephew—had brought this knife to court. The man he gave it to was the

castle's chief of domestic staff. This man was to pass the knife on to the actual assassin. My father was not meant to see the sun come up on the morning after the banquet." He smiled at them grimly. "Because of what I saw in the Wizard's Glass, the knife never reached the hand that would have used it, and there was a new chief of domestics by the end of that week. These are pretty tales I tell you, are they not? Aye, very pretty, indeed."

"Did you see the person the knife was meant for?" Susannah asked. "The actual killer?"

"Yes."

"Anything else? Did you see anything else?" Jake asked. The plan to murder Roland's father didn't seem to hold much interest for him.

"Yes." Roland looked puzzled. "Shoes. Just for a minute. Shoes tum-bling through the air. At first I thought they were autumn leaves. And when I saw what they really were, they were gone and I was lying on my bed with the ball hugged in my arms . . . pretty much the way I carried it back from Mejis. My father ... as I've said, his surprise when he looked inside the bag was very great, indeed."

*You told him who had the knife with the special poison on it, Susan-nah thought, Jeeves the Butler, or whoever, but you didn't tell him who was supposed to actually use it, did you, sugar? Why not? Because you wanted to take care of dat little spot o' work yo ownself?* But before she could ask, Eddie was asking a question of his own.

"Shoes? Flying through the air? Does that mean anything to you now?"

Roland shook his head.

"Tell us about the rest of what you saw in it," Susannah said.

He gave her a look of such terrible pain that what Susannah had only suspected immediately solidified to fact in her mind. She looked away from him and groped for Eddie's hand.

"I cry your pardon, Susannah, but I cannot. Not now. For now, I've told all I can."

"All right," Eddie said. "All right, Roland, that's cool."

"Ool," Oy agreed.

"Did you ever see the witch again?" Jake asked.

For a long time it seemed Roland would not answer this, either, but in the end he did.

"Yes. She wasn't done with me. Like my dreams of Susan, she fol-lowed me. All

the way from Mejis, she followed me."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked in a low, awed voice. "Cripes, Roland, what do you mean?"

"Not now." He got up. "It's time we were on our way again." He nodded to the building which floated ahead of them; the sun was just now clearing its battlements. "Yon glitter-dome's a good distance away, but I think we can reach it this afternoon, if we move brisk. 'Twould be best. It's not a place I'd reach after nightfall, if that can be avoided."

"Do you know what it is yet?" Susannah asked.

"Trouble," he repeated. "And in our road."

#### 4

For awhile that morning, the thinny warbled so loudly that not even the bullets in their ears would entirely stop up the sound; at its worst, Susan-nah felt as if the bridge of her nose would simply disintegrate, and when she looked at Jake, she saw he was weeping copiously—not crying the way people do when they're sad, but the way they do when their sinuses are in total revolt. She couldn't get the saw-player the kid had mentioned out of her mind. *Sounds Hawaiian*, she thought over and over again as Eddie pushed her grimly along in the new wheelchair, weaving in and out of the stalled vehicles. *Sounds Hawaiian, doesn't it? Sounds fucking Hawaiian, doesn't it. Miss Oh So Black and Pretty?*

On both sides of the turnpike the thinny lapped all the way up to the embankment, casting its twitching, misshapen reflections of trees and grain elevators, seeming to watch the pilgrims pass as hungry animals in a zoo might watch plump children. Susannah would find herself thinking of the thinny in Eyebolt Canyon, reaching out hungrily through the smoke for Latigo's milling men, pulling them in (and some going in on their own, walking like zombies in a horror movie), and then she would find herself thinking of the guy in Central Park again, the wacko with the saw. *Sounds Hawaiian, doesn't it? Counting one thinny, and it sounds Hawai-ian, doesn't it?*

Just when she thought she could stand it not a moment longer, the thinny began to draw back from 1-70 again, and its humming warble at last began to fade. Susannah was eventually able to pull the bullets out of her ears. She tucked them

into the side-pocket of her chair with a hand that shook slightly.

"That was a bad one," Eddie said. His voice sounded clogged and weepy. She looked around at him and saw his cheeks were wet, his eyes red. "Take it easy, Suzie-pie," he said. "It's my sinuses, that's all. That sound kills em."

"Me, too," Susannah said.

"My sinuses are okay, but my head aches," Jake said. "Roland, do you have any more aspirin?"

Roland stopped, rummaged, and found the bottle.

"Did you ever see Clay Reynolds again?" Jake asked, after swallow-ing the pills with water from the skin he carried.

"No, but I know what happened to him. He got a bunch together, some of them deserters from Parson's army, went to robbing banks ... in toward our part of the world, this was, but by then bank-thieves and stage-robbers didn't have much to fear from gunslingers."

"The gunslingers were busy with Farson," Eddie said.

"Yes. But Reynolds and his men were trapped by a smart sheriff who turned the main street of a town called Oakley into a killing-zone. Six of the ten in the gang were killed outright. The rest were hung. Reynolds was one of those. This was less than a year later, during the time of Wide Earth." He paused, then said: "One of those shot dead in the killing-zone was Coral Thorin. She had become Reynolds's woman; rode and killed with the rest of them."

They went on in silence for a bit. In the distance, the thinny warbled its endless song. Jake suddenly ran ahead to a parked camper. A note had been left under the wiper blade on the driver's side. By standing on his toes, he was just able to reach it. He scanned it, frowning.

"What does it say?" Eddie asked.

Jake handed it over. Eddie looked, then passed it to Susannah, who read it in turn and gave it to Roland. He looked, then shook his head. "I can make out only a few words—*old woman, dark man*. What does the rest say? Read it to me."

Jake took it back. " 'The old woman from the dreams is in Nebraska. Her name is Abigail.' " He paused. "Then, down here, it says, 'The dark man is in the west. Maybe Vegas.' "

Jake looked up at the gunslinger, the note fluttering in his hand, his face puzzled and uneasy. But Roland was looking toward the palace which shimmered across



the highway—the palace that was not in the west but in the east, the palace that was light, not dark.

"In the west," Roland said. "Dark man, Dark Tower, and always in the west."

"Nebraska's west of here, too," Susannah said hesitantly. "I don't know if that matters, this Abigail person, but..."

"I think she's part of another story," Roland said.

"But a story close to this one," Eddie put in. "Next door, maybe. Close enough to swap sugar for salt... or start arguments."

"I'm sure you're right," Roland said, "and we may have business with the 'old woman' and the 'dark man' yet... but today our business is east. Come on."

They began walking again.



"What about Sheemie?" Jake asked after awhile.

Roland laughed, partly in surprise at the question, partly in pleased remembrance. "He followed us. It couldn't have been easy for him, and it must have been damned scary in places—there were wheels and wheels of wild country between Mejis and Gilead, and plenty of wild folks, too. Worse than just folks, mayhap. But *ka* was with him, and he showed up in time for Year's End Fair. He and that damned mule."

"Capi," Jake said.

"Appy," Oy repeated, padding along at Jake's heel.

"When we went in search of the Tower, I and my friends, Sheemie was with us. As a sort of squire, I suppose you'd say. He . . ." But Roland trailed off, biting at his lip, and of that he would say no more.

"Cordelia?" Susannah asked. "The crazy aunt?"

"Dead before the bonfire had burned down to embers. It might have been a heart-storm, or a brain-storm—what Eddie calls a stroke."

"Perhaps it was shame," Susannah said. "Or horror at what she'd done."

"It may have been," Roland said. "Waking to the truth when it's too late is a terrible thing. I know that very well."

"Something up there," Jake said, pointing at a long stretch of road from which the cars had been cleared. "Do you see?"

Roland did—with his eyes he seemed to see everything—but it was another fifteen minutes or so before Susannah began to pick up the small black specks ahead in the road. She was quite sure she knew what they were, although what she thought was less vision than intuition. Ten minutes after that, she was sure.

They were shoes. Six pairs of shoes placed neatly in a line across the eastbound lanes of Interstate 70.

# CHAPTER II

## SHOES IN THE ROAD

### 1

They reached the shoes at mid-morning. Beyond them, clearer now, stood the glass palace. It glimmered a delicate green shade, like the reflection of a lily pad in still water. There were shining gates in front of it; red pen-nons snapped from its towers in a light breeze.

The shoes were also red.

Susannah's impression that there were six pairs was understandable but wrong—there were actually four pairs and one quartet. This latter—four dark red booties made of supple leather—was undoubtedly meant for the four-footed member of their *ka-tet*. Roland picked one of them up and felt inside it. He didn't know how many bumblers had worn shoes in the history of the world, but he was willing to guess that none had ever been gifted with a set of silk-lined leather booties.

"Bally, Gucci, eat your heart out," Eddie said. "This is great stuff."

Susannah's were easiest to pick out, and not just because of the femi-nine, sparkly swoops on the sides. They weren't really shoes at all—they had been made to fit over the stumps of her legs, which ended just above the knees.

"Now look at this," she marvelled, holding one up so the sun could flash on the rhinestones with which the shoes were decorated ... if they *were* rhinestones. She had a crazy notion that maybe they were diamond chips. "Cappies. After four years of gettin along in what my friend Cyn-thia calls 'circumstances of reduced leg-room,' I finally got myself a pair of cappies. Think of that."

"Cappies," Eddie mused. "Is that what they call em?"

"That's what they call em, sugar."

Jake's were bright red Oxfords—except for the color, they would have looked

perfectly at home in the well-bred classrooms of The Piper School. He flexed one, then turned it over. The sole was bright and un-marked. There was no manufacturer's stamp, nor had he really expected one. His father had maybe a dozen pairs of fine handmade shoes. Jake knew them when he saw them. Eddie's were low boots with Cuban heels (*Maybe in this world you call them Mejis heels*, he thought) and pointed toes ... what, back in his other life, had been known as "street-boppers." Kids from the mid-sixties—an era Odetta/Detta/Susannah had just missed—might have called them "Beatle-boots." Roland's, of course, were cowboy boots. Fancy ones—you'd go danc-ing rather than droving in such as these. Looped stitching, side decora-tions, narrow, haughty arches. He examined them without picking them up, then looked at his fellow travellers and frowned. They were looking at each other. You would have said three people couldn't do that, only a pair ... but you only would have said it if you'd never been part of a *ka-tet*.

Roland still shared *khef* with them; he felt the powerful current of their mingled thought, but could not understand it. *Because it's of their world. They come from different whens of that world, but they see some-thing here that's common to all three of them.*

"What is it?" he asked. "What do they mean, these shoes?"

"I don't think any of us know *that*, exactly," Susannah said.

"No," Jake said. "It's another riddle." He looked at the weird, blood red Oxford shoe in his hands with distaste. "Another goddamned riddle."

"Tell what you know." He looked toward the glass palace again. It was perhaps fifteen New York miles away, now, shining in the clear day, delicate as a mirage, but as real as ... well, as real as shoes. "Please, tell me what you know about these shoes."

"I got shoes, *you* got shoes, all God's chillun got shoes," Odetta said. "That's the prevailin opinion, anyway."

"Well," Eddie said, "*we* got em, anyway. And you're thinking what I'm thinking, aren't you?"

"I guess I am."

"You, Jake?"

Instead of answering with words, Jake picked up the other Oxford (Roland had no doubt that all the shoes, including Oy's, would fit per-fectly) and clapped them

briskly together three times. It meant nothing to Roland, but both Eddie and Susannah reacted violently, looking around, looking especially at the sky, as if expecting a storm born out of this bright autumn sunshine. I hey ended up looking at the glass palace again . . . and then at each other, in that knowing, round-eyed way that made Roland feel like shaking them both until their teeth rattled. Yet he waited. Sometimes that was all a man could do.

"After you killed Jonas, you looked into the ball," Eddie said, turning to him.

"Yes."

"Travelled in the ball."

"Yes, but I don't want to talk about that again now; it has nothing to do with these—"

"I think it does," Eddie said. "You flew inside a pink storm. Inside a pink *gale*, you could say. Gale is a word you might use for a storm, isn't it? Especially if you were making up a riddle."

"Sure," Jake said. He sounded dreamy, almost like a boy who talks in his sleep.

"When does Dorothy fly over the Wizard's Rainbow? When she's a Gale."

"We ain't in Kansas anymore, sugar," Susannah said, and then voiced a strange, humorless bark which Roland supposed was a species of laugh-ter. "May look a little like it, but Kansas was never . . . you know, this *thin*:'

"I don't understand you," Roland said. But he felt cold, and his heart was beating too fast. There were thinnies everywhere now, hadn't he told them that? Worlds melting into one another as the forces of the Tower weakened? As the day when the rose would be plowed under drew nearer?

"You saw things as you flew," Eddie said. "Before you got to the dark land, the one you called Thunderclap, you saw things. The piano-player, Sheb. Who turned up again later in your life, didn't he?"

"Yes, in Tull."

"And the dweller with the red hair?"

"Him, too. He had a bird named Zoltan. But when we met, he and I, we said the normal. 'Life for you, life for your crop,' that sort of thing. I thought I heard the same when he flew by me in the pink storm, but he really said something else." He glanced at Susannah. "I saw your wheel-chair, too. The old one."

"And you saw the witch."

"Yes. I—"

In a creaky chortle that reminded Roland unnervingly of Rhea, Jake Chambers cried: "I'll get you, my pretty! And your little dog, too!"

Roland stared at him, trying not to gape.

"Only in the movie, the witch wasn't riding a broom," Jake said. "She was on her bike, the one with the basket on the back."

"Yeah, no reap-charms, either," Eddie said. "Would have been a nice touch, though. I tell you, Jake, when I was a kid, I used to have night-mares about the way she laughed."

"It was the monkeys that gave me the creeps," Susannah said. "The flying monkeys. I'd get thinkin about em, and then have to crawl into bed with my mom and dad. They'd still be arguin 'bout whose bright idea it was to take me to that show in the foist place when I fell asleep be-tween em."

"I wasn't worried about clapping the heels together," Jake said. "Not a bit." It was Susannah and Eddie he was speaking to; for the time being, it was as if Roland wasn't even there. "I wasn't wearing them, after all."

"True," Susannah said, sounding severe, "but you know what my daddy always used to say?"

"No, but I have a feeling we're going to find out," Eddie said.

She gave Eddie a brief, severe look, then turned her attention back to Jake. "

'Never whistle for the wind unless you want it to blow,' " she said. "And it's good advice, no matter what Young Mister Foolish here may think."

"Spanked again," Eddie said, grinning.

"Tanked!" Oy said, eyeing Eddie severely.

"Explain this to me," Roland said in his softest voice. "I would hear. I would share your *khef*. And I would share it *now*."

## 2

They told him a story almost every American child of the twentieth century knew, about a Kansas farmgirl named Dorothy Gale who had been carried away by a cyclone and deposited, along with her dog, in the Land of Oz. There was no 1-70 in Oz, but there was a yellow brick road which served much the same purpose, and there were witches, both good and bad. There was a *ka-tet* comprised of Dorothy, Toto, and three friends she met along the way: the Cowardly Lion, the

Tin Woodman, and the Scare-crow. They each had

*(bird and bear and hare and fish)*

a fondest wish, and it was with Dorothy's that Roland's new friends (and Roland himself, for that matter) identified the most strongly: she wanted to find her way home again.

"The Munchkins told her that she had to follow the yellow brick road to Oz," Jake said, "and so she went. She met the others along the way, sort of like you met us, Roland—"

"Although you don't look much like Judy Garland," Eddie put in.

"—and eventually they got there. To Oz, the Emerald Palace, and the guy who lived in the Emerald Palace." He looked toward the glass palace ahead of them, greener and greener in the strengthening light, and then back to Roland.

"Yes, I understand. And was this fellow, Oz, a powerful *dinh*? A Baron? Perhaps a King?"

Again, the three of them exchanged a glance from which Roland was excluded.

"That's complicated," Jake said. "He was sort of a humbug—"

"A bumhug? What's that?"

"*Humbug*," Jake said, laughing. "A faker. All talk, no action. But maybe the important thing is that the Wizard actually came from—"

"Wizard?" Roland asked sharply. He grasped Jake's shoulder with his diminished right hand. "Why do you call him so?"

"Because that was his title, sug," Susannah said. "The Wizard of Oz." She lifted Roland's hand gently but firmly from Jake's shoulder. "Let him tell it, now. He don't need you to squeeze it out of him."

"Did I hurt you? Jake, I cry your pardon."

"Nah, I'm fine," Jake said. "Don't worry about it. Anyway, Dorothy and her friends had a lot of adventures before finding out the Wizard was a, you know, a bumhug." Jake giggled at this with his hands clapped to his forehead and pushing back his hair, like a child of five. "He couldn't give the Lion courage, the Scarecrow a brain, or the Tin Woodman a heart. Worst of all, he couldn't send Dorothy back to Kansas. The Wizard had a balloon, but he went without her. I don't think he meant to, but he did."

"It seems to me, from your telling of the tale," Roland said, speaking very slowly, "that Dorothy's friends had the things they wanted all along."

"That's the moral of the story," Eddie said. "Maybe what makes it a great story. But Dorothy was stuck in Oz, you see. Then Glinda showed up. Glinda the Good. And, as a present for smooshing one of the bad witches under her house and melting another one, Glinda told Dorothy how to use the ruby slippers. The ones Glinda gave her."

Eddie raised the red Cuban-heeled street-boppers which had been left for him on the dotted white line of 1-70.

"Glinda told Dorothy to click the heels of the ruby slippers together three times. That would take her back to Kansas, she said. And it did." "And that's the end of the tale?"

"Well," Jake said, "it was so popular that the guy who wrote it went ahead and wrote about a thousand more Oz stories—"

"Yeah," Eddie said. "Everything but *Glinda's Guide to Firm Thighs*."

"—and there was this crazy remake called *The Wiz*, starring black people—"

"Really?" Susannah asked. She looked bemused. "What a *peculiar* concept."

"—but the only one that really matters is the first one, I think," Jake finished.

Roland hunkered and put his hands into the boots which had been left for him. He lifted them, looked at them, put them down again. "Are we supposed to put them on, do you think? Here and now?"

His three friends from New York looked at each other doubtfully. At last Susannah spoke for them—fed him the *khef* which he could feel but not quite share on his own.

"Best not to right now, maybe. Too many bad-ass spirits here." "*Takuro* spirits," Eddie murmured, mostly to himself. Then: "Look, let's just take em along. If we're supposed to put em on, I think we'll know when the time comes. In the meantime, I think we ought to beware of bumhugs bearing gifts."

It cracked Jake up, as Eddie had known it would; sometimes a word or an image got into your funny bone like a virus and just lived there awhile. Tomorrow the word "bumhug" might mean nothing to the kid; for the rest of today, however, he was going to laugh every time he heard it. Eddie intended to use it a lot, especially when ole Jake wasn't expect-ing it.

They picked up the red shoes which had been left for them in the east-bound lanes (Jake took Oy's) and moved on again toward the shimmering glass castle.

*Oz*, Roland thought. He searched his memory, but he didn't think it was a name he



had ever heard before, or a word of the High Speech that had come in disguise, as *char* had come disguised as Charlie. Yet it had a sound that belonged in this business; a sound more of his world than of Jake's, Susannah's, and Eddie's, from whence the tale had come.

### 3

Jake kept expecting the Green Palace to begin looking normal as they drew closer to it, the way the attractions in Disney World began to look normal as you drew close to them—not *ordinary*, necessarily, but *normal*, things which were as much a part of the world as the corner bus stop or mailbox or park bench, stuff you could touch, stuff you could write fuck piper on, if you took a notion.

But that didn't happen, wasn't *going* to happen, and as they neared the Green Palace, Jake realized something else: it was the most beautiful, radiant thing he had ever seen in his life. Not trusting it—and he did not— didn't change the fact. It was like a drawing in a fairy-tale book, one so good it had become real, somehow. And, like the thinny, it hummed ... except that this sound was far fainter, and not unpleasant.

Pale green walls rose to battlements that jutted and towers that soared, seeming almost to touch the clouds floating over the Kansas plains. These towers were topped with needles of a darker, emerald green; it was from these that the red pennants nickered. Upon each pennant the symbol of the open eye



had been traced in yellow.

*It's the mark of the Crimson King*, Jake thought. *It's really his sigil, not John Farson 's*. He didn't know how he knew this (how could he, when Alabama's Crimson Tide was the only Crimson *anything* he knew?), but he did.

"So beautiful," Susannah murmured, and when Jake glanced at her, he thought she was almost crying. "But not nice, somehow. Not right. Maybe not downright *bad*, the way the thinny is, but.. ."

"But not nice," Eddie said. "Yeah. That works. Not a red light, maybe, but a bright yellow one just the same." He rubbed the side of his face (a gesture he had picked up from Roland without even realizing it) and looked puzzled. "It feels almost not

serious—a practical joke."

"I doubt it's a joke," Roland said. "Do you think it's a copy of the place where Dorothy and her *ka-tet* met the false wizard?"

Again, the three erstwhile New Yorkers seemed to exchange a single glance of consultation. When it was over, Eddie spoke for all of them. "Yeah. Yeah, probably. It's not the same as the one in the movie, but if this thing came out of our minds, it wouldn't be. Because we see the one from L. Frank Baum's book, too. Both from the illustrations in the book. . ."

"And the ones from our imaginations," Jake said.

"But that's it," Susannah said. "I'd say we're definitely off to see the Wizard."

"You bet," Eddie said. "Because-because-because-because-*because*—"

"*Because of the wonderful things he does!*" Jake and Susannah finished in unison, then laughed, delighted with each other, while Roland frowned at them, feeling puzzled and looking left out.

"But I have to tell you guys," Eddie said, "that it's only gonna take about one more wonderful thing to send me around to the dark side of the Psycho Moon. Most likely for good."

#### 4

As they drew closer, they could see Interstate 70 stretching away into the pale green depths of the castle's slightly rounded outer wall; it floated there like an optical illusion. Closer yet, and they could hear the pennants snapping in the breeze and see their own ripply reflections, like drowned folk who somehow walk at the bottoms of watery tropical graves.

There was an inner redoubt of dark blue glass—it was a color Jake associated with the bottles fountain-pen ink came in—and a rust-hued wall-walk between the redoubt and the outer wall. That color made Susannah think of the bottles Hires root-beer had come in when she was a little girl.

The way in was blocked by a barred gate that was both huge and ethereal: it looked like wrought iron which had been turned to glass. Each cunningly made stake was a different color, and these colors seemed to come from the *inside*, as if the bars were filled with some bright gas or liquid.

The travellers stopped before it. There was no sign of the turnpike beyond it;

instead of roadway, there was a courtyard of silver glass—a huge flat mirror, in fact. Clouds floated serenely through its depths; so did the image of the occasional swooping bird. Sun reflected off this glass courtyard and ran across the green castle walls in ripples. On the far side, the wall of the palace's inner ward rose in a glimmery green cliff, broken by narrow loophole windows of jet-black glass. There was also an arched entry in this wall that made Jake think of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

To the left of the main doorway was a sentry-box made of cream-colored glass shot through with hazy orange threads. Its door, painted with red stripes, stood open. The phone-booth-sized room inside was empty, although there was something on the floor which looked to Jake like a newspaper.

Above the entry, flanking its darkness, were two crouching, leering gargoyles of darkest violet glass. Their pointed tongues poked out like bruises.

The pennants atop the towers flapped like schoolyard flags.

Crows cawed over empty cornfields now a week past the Reap.

Distant, the thinny whined and warbled.

"Look at the bars of this gate," Susannah said. She sounded breathless and awestruck. "Look very closely."

Jake bent toward the yellow bar until his nose nearly touched it and a faint yellow stripe ran down the middle of his face. At first he saw nothing, and then he gasped. What he had taken for motes of some kind were creatures—living creatures—imprisoned inside the bar, swimming in tiny schools. They looked like fish in an aquarium, but they also (*their heads*, Jake told himself, *I think it's mostly their heads*) looked oddly, disquietingly human. As if, Jake thought, he were looking into a vertical golden sea, all the ocean in a glass rod—and living myths no bigger than grains of dust swimming within it. A tiny woman with a fish's tail and long blonde hair streaming out behind her swam to her side of the glass, seemed to peer out at the giant boy (her eyes were round, startled, and beautiful), and then flipped away again.

Jake felt suddenly dizzy and weak. He closed his eyes until the feeling of vertigo went away, then opened them again and looked around at the others. "Cripes! Are they all the same?"

"All different, I think," said Eddie, who had already peered into two or three. He bent close to the purple rod, and his cheeks lit up as if in the glow of an old-

fashioned fluoroscope. "These guys here look like birds— little tiny birds." Jake looked and saw that Eddie was right: inside the gate's purple up-right were flocks of birds no bigger than summer minges. They swooped giddily about in their eternal twilight, weaving over and under one another, their wings leaving tiny silver trails of bubbles.

"Are they really there?" Jake asked breathlessly. "Are they, Roland, **or** are we only imagining them?"

"I don't know. But I know what this gate has been made to look like."

"So do I," Eddie said. He surveyed the shining posts, each with its own column of imprisoned light and life. Each of the gate's wings consisted of six colored bars. The one in the center—broad and flat instead of round, and made to split in two when the gate was opened—was the thirteenth. This one was dead black, and in this one nothing moved.

*Oh, maybe not that you can see, but there are things moving around in there, all right, Jake thought. There's life in there, terrible life. And maybe there are roses, too. Drowned ones.*

"It's a Wizard's Gate," Eddie said. "Each bar has been made to look like one of the balls in Maerlyn's Rainbow. Look, here's the pink one."

Jake leaned toward it, hands propped on his thighs. He knew what would be inside even before he saw them: horses, of courses. Tiny herds of them, galloping through that strange pink stuff that was neither light nor liquid. Horses running in search of a Drop they would never find, mayhap.

Eddie stretched his hands out to grasp the sides of the central post, the black one.

"Don't!" Susannah called sharply.

Eddie ignored her, but Jake saw his chest stop for a moment and his lips tighten as he wrapped his hands around the black bar and waited for something—some force perhaps sent Special Delivery all the way from the Dark Tower itself—to change him, or even to strike him dead. When nothing happened, he breathed deep again, and risked a smile. "No electricity, but . . ." He pulled; the gate held fast. "No give, either. I see where it splits down the middle, but I get nothing. Want to take a shot, Roland?"

Roland reached for the gate, but Jake put a hand on his arm and stopped him before the gunslinger could do more than give it a preliminary shake. "Don't bother. That's not the way."

"Then what is?"

Instead of answering, Jake sat down in front of the gate, near the place where this strange version of 1-70 ended, and began putting on the shoes which had been left for him. Eddie watched a moment, then sat down beside him. "I guess we ought to try it," he said to Jake, "even though it'll probably turn out to be just another bumhug."

Jake laughed, shook his head, and began to tighten the laces of the blood-red Oxfords. He and Eddie both knew it was no bumhug. Not this time.

## 5

"Okay," Jake said when they had all put on their red shoes (he thought they looked extraordinarily stupid, especially Eddie's pair). "I'll count to three, and we'll click our heels together. Like this." He clicked the Ox-fords together once, sharply . . . and the gate shivered like a loosely fastened shutter blown by a strong wind. Susannah cried out. There followed a low, sweet chiming sound from the Green Palace, as if the walls themselves had vibrated.

"I guess this'll do the trick, all right," Eddie said. "I warn you, though, I'm not singing 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow.' That's not in my contract."

"The rainbow is here," the gunslinger said softly, stretching his diminished hand out to the gate.

It wiped the smile off Eddie's face. "Yeah, I know. I'm a little scared, Roland."

"So am I," the gunslinger said, and indeed, Jake thought he looked pale and ill.

"Go on, sugar," Susannah said. "Count before we all lose our nerve." "One ... two ... *three.*"

They clicked their heels together solemnly and in unison: *tock, tock, tock*. The gate shivered more violently this time, the colors in the uprights brightening perceptibly. The chime that followed was higher, sweeter—the sound of fine crystal tapped with the haft of a knife. It echoed in dreamy harmonics that made Jake shiver, half with pleasure and half with pain.

But the gate didn't open.

"What—" Eddie began.

"I know," Jake said. "We forgot Oy."

"Oh Christ," Eddie said. "I left the world I knew to watch a kid try to put booties

on a fucked-up weasel. Shoot me, Roland, before I breed."

Roland ignored him, watching Jake closely as the boy sat down on the turnpike and called, "Oy! To me!"

The bumbler came willingly enough, and although he had surely been a wild creature before they had met him on the Path of the Beam, he allowed Jake to slip the red leather booties onto his paws without making trouble: in fact, once he got the idea, he stepped into the last two. When all four of the little red shoes were in place (they looked, in fact, the most like Dorothy's ruby slippers), Oy sniffed at one of them, then looked attentively back at Jake.

Jake clicked his heels together three times, looking at the bumbler as he did so, ignoring the rattle of the gate and the soft chime from the walls of the Green Palace.

"You, Oy!"

"Oy!"

He rolled over on his back like a dog playing dead, then simply looked at his own feet with a kind of disgusted bewilderment. Looking at him, Jake had a sharp memory: trying to pat his stomach and rub his head at the same time, and his father making fun of him when he couldn't do it right away.

"Roland, help me. He knows what he's supposed to do, but he doesn't know how to do it." Jake glanced up at Eddie. "And don't make any smart remarks, okay?"

"No," Eddie said. "No smart remarks, Jake. Do you think just Oy has to do it this time, or is it still a group effort?"

"Just him, I think."

"But it wouldn't hurt us to kind of click along with Mitch," Susannah said.

"Mitch who?" Eddie asked, looking blank.

"Never mind. Go on, Jake, Roland. Give us a count again."

Eddie grasped Oy's forepaws. Roland gently grasped the bumbler's rear paws. Oy looked nervous at this—as if he perhaps expected to be swung briskly into the air and given the old heave-ho—but he didn't struggle.

"One, two, *three*."

Jake and Roland gently patted Oy's forepaws and rear paws together in unison. At the same time they clicked the heels of their own footwear. Eddie and Susannah did the same.

This time the harmonic was a deep, sweet bong, like a glass church bell. The black

glass bar running down the center of the gate did not split open but shattered, spraying crumbs of obsidian glass in all directions.

Some rattled against Oy's hide. He sprang up in a hurry, yanking out of Jake's and Roland's grip and trotting a little distance away. He sat on the broken white line between the travel lane and the passing lane of the high-way, his ears laid back, looking at the gate and panting.

"Come on," Roland said. He went to the left wing of the gate and pushed it slowly open. He stood at the edge of the mirror courtyard, a tall, lanky man in cowpoke jeans, an ancient shirt of no particular color, and improbable red cowboy boots.

"Let's go in and see what the Wizard of Oz has to say for himself."

"If he's still here," Eddie said.

"Oh, I think he's here," Roland murmured. "Yes, I think he's here."

He ambled toward the main door with the empty sentry-box beside it. The others followed, welded to their own downward reflections by the red shoes like sets of Siamese twins.

Oy came last, skipping nimbly along in his ruby slippers, pausing once to sniff down at his own reflected snout.

"Oy!" he cried to the humbler floating below him, and then hurried after Jake.

## CHAPTER III

### the wizard

Roland stopped at the sentry-box, glanced in, then picked up the thing which was lying on the floor. The others caught up with him and clustered around. It had

looked like a newspaper, and that was just what it was . . . although an exceedingly odd one. No Topeka *Capital-Journal* this, and no news of a population-levelling plague.

## The Oy Daily Buzz

Vol. MDLXVDI No. 96 "Daily Buzz, Daily Buzz, Handsome Iz as Handsome Duuzz" Weather: Here today, gone tomorrow Lucky Numbers: None Prognosis: Bad

Blah blah yak blah blah blah good is bad bad is good all the stuffs the same good is bad bad is good all the stuffs the same go slow past the drawers all the stuffs the same blah blah blah blah blah blah blah Blame is a pain all the stuffs the same yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak charyou tree all the stuffs the same blah yak blah blah yak yak blah blah blah yak yak yak baked turkey cooked goose all the stuffs the same blah blah yak yak ride a train die in pain all the stuffs the same blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blame blame blame blame blame blame blah blah blah blah blah yak yak blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. (Related story p. 6)

Below this was a picture of Roland, Eddie, Susannah, and Jake cross-ing the mirrored courtyard, as if this had happened the day before instead of only minutes ago. Beneath it was a caption reading: Tragedy in **Oz: Travellers Arrive Seeking Fame and Fortune; Find Death Instead.**

"I like that," Eddie said, adjusting Roland's revolver in the holster he wore low on his hip. "Comfort and encouragement after days of confu-sion. Like a hot drink on a cold fucking night."

"Don't be afraid of this," Roland said. "This is a joke."



"I'm not afraid," Eddie said, "but it's a little more than a joke. I lived with Henry Dean for a lot of years, and I know when there's a plot to psych me out afoot. I know it very well." He looked curiously at Roland. "I hope you don't mind me saying this, but *you 're* the one who looks scared, Roland."

"I'm terrified," Roland said simply.

## 2

The arched entryway made Susannah think of a song which had been popular ten years or so before she had been yanked out of her world and into Roland's. *Saw an eyeball peepin through a smoky cloud behind the Green Door*, the lyric went.

*When I said "Joe sent me, " someone laughed out loud behind the Green Door.*

There were actually two doors here in-stead of one, and no peephole through which an eyeball could look in ei-ther. Nor did Susannah try that old speakeasy deal about how Joe had sent her. She did, however, bend forward to read the sign hanging from one of the circular glass door-pulls. *bell out of order, please knock*, it said.

"Don't bother," she said to Roland, who had actually doubled up his fist to do as the sign said. "It's from the story, that's all."

Eddie pulled her chair back slightly, stepped in front of it, and took hold of the circular pulls. The doors opened easily, the hinges rolling in silence. He took a step forward into what looked like a shadowy green grotto, cupped his hands to his mouth, and called: "*Hey!*"

The sound of his voice rolled away and came back changed... small, echoing, lost. Dying, it seemed.

"Christ," Eddie said. "Do we have to do this?"

"If we want to get back to the Beam, I think so." Roland looked paler than ever, but he led them in. Jake helped Eddie lift Susannah's chair over the sill (a milky block of jade-colored glass) and inside. Oy's little shoes flashed dim red on the green glass floor. They had gone only ten paces when the doors slammed shut behind them with a no-question-about-it boom that rolled past them and went echoing away into the depths of the Green Palace.

## 3

There was no reception room; only a vaulted, cavernous hallway that seemed to go on forever. The walls were lit with a faint green glow. *This is just like the hallway in the movie*, Jake thought, *the one where the Cow-ardly Lion got so scared when he stepped on his own tail.*

And, adding a little extra touch of verisimilitude Jake could have done without, Eddie spoke up in a trembly (and better than passable) Bert Lahr imitation: "Wait a minute, fellas, I wuz just thinkin—I really don't wanna see the Wizard this much. I better wait for you outside!"

"Stop it," Jake said sharply.

"Oppit!" Oy agreed. He walked directly at Jake's heel, swinging his head watchfully from side to side as he went. Jake could hear no sound except for their own passage ... yet he sensed something: a sound that *wasn't*. It was, he thought, like looking at a wind-chime that wants only the slightest puff of breeze to set it tinkling.

"Sorry," Eddie said. "Really." He pointed. "Look down there."

About forty yards ahead of them, the green corridor *did* end, in a nar-row green doorway of amazing height—perhaps thirty feet from the floor to its pointed tip. And from behind it, Jake could now hear a steady thrumming sound. As they drew closer and the sound grew louder, his dread grew. He had to make a conscious effort to take the last dozen steps to the door. He knew this sound; he knew it from the run he'd made with Gasher under Lud, and from the run he and his friends had made on Blaine the Mono. It was the steady beat-beat-beat of slo-trans engines. "It's like a nightmare," he said in a small, close-to-tears voice. "We're right back where we started."

"No, Jake," the gunslinger said, touching his hair. "Never think it. What you feel is an illusion. Stand and be true."

The sign on this door wasn't from the movie, and only Susannah knew it was from Dante. abandon hope, all ye who enter here, it said.

Roland reached out with his two-fingered right hand and pulled the thirty-foot door open.

What lay beyond it was, to the eyes of Jake, Susannah, and Eddie, a weird combination of *The Wizard of Oz* and Blaine the Mono. A thick mg (pale blue, like the one in the Barony Coach) lay on the floor. The chamber was like the nave of a cathedral, soaring to impenetrable heights of greenish-black. The pillars which supported the glowing walls were great glass ribs of alternating green and pink light; the pink was the exact shade of Blaine's hull. Jake saw these supporting pillars had been carved with a billion different images, none of them comforting; they jostled the eye and unsettled the heart. There seemed to be a preponderance of screaming faces.

Ahead of them, dwarfing the visitors, turning them into creatures that seemed no bigger than ants, was the chamber's only furnishing: an enormous green glass throne. Jake tried to estimate its size and was unable—he had no reference-points to help him. He thought that the throne's back might be fifty feet high, but it could as easily have been seventy-five or a hundred. It was marked with the open eye symbol, this time traced in red instead of yellow. The rhythmic thrusting of the light made the eye seem alive; to be beating like a heart.

Above the throne, rising like the pipes of a mighty medieval organ, were thirteen great cylinders, each pulsing a different color. Each, that was, save for the pipe which ran directly down in back of the throne's center. That one was black as midnight and as still as death.

"Hey!" Susannah shouted from her chair. "Anyone here?"

At the sound of her voice, the pipes flashed so brilliantly that Jake had to shield his eyes. For a moment the entire throneroom glared like an exploding rainbow. Then the pipes went out, went dark, went dead, just as the wizard's glass in Roland's story had done when the glass (or the force inhabiting the glass) decided to shut up for awhile. Now there was only the column of blackness, and the steady green pulse of the empty throne.

Next, a somehow tired humming sound, as of a very old servomechanism being called into use one final time, began to whine its way into their ears. Panels, each at least six feet long and two feet wide, slid open in the arms of the throne. From the black slots thus revealed, a rose-colored smoke began to drift out and up. As it rose, it darkened to a bright red. And in it, a terribly familiar zigzag line appeared. Jake knew what it was even before the words

*{Lud Candleton Rilea The Falls of the Hounds Dasherville Topeka}*

appeared, glowing smoke-bright.

It was Blaine's route-map.

Roland could say all he wanted about how things had changed, how Jake's feeling of being trapped in a nightmare

*{this is the worst nightmare of my life, and that is the truth}*

was just an illusion created by his confused mind and frightened heart, but Jake knew better. This place might look a little bit like the throneroom of Oz the Great and Terrible, but it was really Blaine the Mono. They were back aboard Blaine, and soon the riddling would begin all over again.

Jake felt like screaming.

## 5

Eddie recognized the voice that boomed out of the smoky route-map hanging above the green throne, but he believed it was Blaine the Mono no more than he believed it was the Wizard of Oz. *Some* wizard, perhaps, but this wasn't the Emerald City, and Blaine was just as dead as dogshit. Eddie had sent him home with a fuckin rupture.

"HELLO THERE AGAIN, LITTLE TRAILHANDS!"

The smoky route-map pulsed, but Eddie no longer associated it with the voice, although he guessed they were supposed to. No, the voice was coming from the pipes.

He glanced down, saw Jake's paper-white face, and knelt beside him. "If scrap, kid," he said.

"N-No ... it's Blaine ... not dead..."

"He's dead, all right. This is nothing but an amplified version of the after-school announcements . . . who's got detention and who's supposed to report to Room Six for Speech Therapy. You dig?"

"What?" Jake looked up at him, lips wet and trembling, eyes dazed. "What do you—"

"Those pipes are *speakers*. Even a pipsqueak can sound big through a twelve-speaker Dolby sound-system; don't you remember the movie? It has to sound big because it's a bumhug, Jake—just a bumhug."

"WHAT ARE YOU TELLING HIM, EDDIE OF NEW YORK? ONE OF YOUR

STUPID, NASTY-MINDED LITTLE JOKES? ONE OF YOUR UNFAIR RIDDLES?"

"Yeah," Eddie said. "The one that goes, 'How many dipolar computers does it take to screw in a lightbulb?' Who are you, buddy? I know goddam well you're not Blaine the Mono, so who are you?"

"I ... AM . . . **Oz!**" the voice thundered. The glass columns flashed; so did the pipes behind the throne. "OZ THE GREAT! OZ THE POWERFUL! WHO ARE YOU?"

Susannah rolled forward until her wheelchair was at the base of the dull green steps leading up to a throne that would have dwarfed even Lord Perth.

"I'm Susannah Dean, the small and crippled," she said, "and I was raised to be polite, but not to suffer bullshit. We're here because we're *s'poz*ed to be here—why else did we get left the shoes?"

"WHAT DO YOU WANT OF ME, SUSANNAH? WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE, LITTLE COWGIRL?"

"*You* know," she said. "We want what everyone wants, so far as I know—to go back home again, 'cause there's no place like home. We—"

"You can't go home," Jake said. He spoke in a rapid, frightened murmur. "You can't go home again, Thomas Wolfe said that, and that is the truth."

"It's a *lie*, sug," Susannah said. "A flat-out lie. You *can* go home again. All you have to do is find the right rainbow and walk under it. We've found it; the rest is just, you know, footwork."

"WOULD YOU GO BACK TO NEW YORK, SUSANNAH DEAN? EDDIE DEAN? JAKE CHAMBERS? IS THAT WHAT YOU ASK OF OZ, THE MIGHTY AND POWERFUL?"

"New York isn't home for us anymore," Susannah said. She looked very small yet very fearless as she sat in her new wheelchair at the foot of the enormous, pulsing throne. "No more than Gilead is home for Roland. Take us back to the Path of the Beam. That's where we want to go, because that's our way home. Only way home we got."

"GO AWAY!" cried the voice from the pipes. "GO AWAY AND COME BACK TOMORROW! WE'LL DISCUSS THE BEAM THEN! FIDDLE-DE-DEE, SAID SCARLETT, WE'LL TALK ABOUT THE BEAM TOMORROW, FOR TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY!"

"No," Eddie said. "We'll talk about it now."

"DO NOT AROUSE THE WRATH OF THE GREAT AND POW-ERFUL OZ!" the voice cried, and the pipes flashed furiously with each word. Susannah was sure this was supposed to be scary, but she found it almost amusing, instead. It was like watching a salesman demonstrate a child's toy. *Hey, kids! When you talk, the pipes flash bright colors! Try it and see!*

"Sugar, you best listen, now," Susannah said. "What *you* don't want to do is arouse the wrath of folks with guns. Especially when you be livin in a glass house."

"I SAID COME BACK TOMORROW!"

Red smoke once more began to boil out of the slots in the arms of the throne. It was thicker now. The shape which had been Blaine's route-map melted apart and joined it. The smoke formed a face, this time. It was nar-row and hard and watchful, framed by long hair.

*It's the man Roland shot in the desert, Susannah thought wonderingly. It's that man Jonas. I know it is.*

Now Oz spoke in a slightly trembling voice: "DO YOU PRESUME TO THREATEN THE GREAT OZ?" The lips of the huge, smoky face hovering over the throne's seat parted in a snarl of mingled menace and contempt. "YOU UNGRATEFUL CREATURES! OH, YOU UNGRATE-FUL CREATURES!" Eddie, who knew smoke and mirrors when he saw them, had glanced in another direction. His eyes widened and he gripped Susannah's arm above the elbow.

"Look," he whispered. "Christ, Suze, look at Oy!"

The billy-bumbler had no interest in smoke-ghosts, whether they were monorail route-maps, dead Coffin Hunters, or just Hollywood spe-cial effects of the pre-World War II variety. He had seen (or smelled) something that was more interesting.

Susannah grabbed Jake, turned him, and pointed at the bumbler. She saw the boy's eyes widen with understanding a moment before Oy reached the small alcove in the left wall. It was screened from the main chamber by a green curtain which matched the glass walls. Oy stretched his long neck forward, caught the curtain's fabric in his teeth, and yanked it back.

Behind the curtain red and green lights flashed; cylinders spun inside glass boxes; needles moved back and forth inside long rows of lighted di-als. Yet Jake barely noticed these things. It was the man who took all his attention, the one sitting at the console, his back to them. His filthy hair, streaked with dirt and blood, hung to his shoulders in matted clumps. He was wearing some sort of headset, and was speaking into a tiny mike which hung in front of his mouth. His back was to them, and at first he had no idea that Oy had smelled him out and uncovered his hiding place.

"GO!" thundered the voice from the pipes . . . except now Jake saw where it was *really* coming from. "COME BACK TOMORROW IF YOU LIKE, BUT GO NOW! I WARN YOU!"

"It *is* Jonas, Roland must not have killed him after all," Eddie whis-pered, but Jake knew better. He had recognized the voice. Even distorted by the amplification of the colored pipes, he had recognized the voice. How could he have ever believed it to be the voice of Blaine?

"I WARN YOU, IF YOU REFUSE—"

Oy barked, a sharp and somehow forbidding sound. The man in the equipment alcove began to turn.

*Tell me, cully, Jake remembered this voice saying before its owner had discovered the dubious attractions of amplification. Tell me all you know about dipolar computers and transitive circuits. Tell me and I'll give you a drink.*

It wasn't Jonas, and it wasn't the Wizard of anything. It was David Quick's grandson. It was the Tick-Tock Man.

## 7

Jake stared at him, horrified. The coiled, dangerous creature who had lived beneath Lud with his mates—Gasher and Hoots and Brandon and Tilly—was gone. This might have been that monster's ruined father ... or grandfather. His left eye—the one Oy had punctured with his claws— bulged white and misshapen, partly in its socket and partly on his un-shaven cheek. The right side of his head looked half-scalped, the skull showing through in a long, triangular strip. Jake had a distant, panic-darkened memory of a flap of skin falling over the side of Tick-Tock's face, but he had been on the edge of hysteria by that point... and was again

now.

Oy had also recognized the man who had tried to kill him and was barking hysterically, head down, teeth bared, back bowed. Tick-Tock stared at him with wide, stunned eyes.

"Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain," said a voice from behind them, and then tittered. "My friend Andrew is having another in a long series of bad days. Poor boy. I suppose I was wrong to bring him out of Lud, but he just looked so *lost*..." The owner of the voice tittered again.

Jake swung around and saw that there was now a man sitting in the middle of the great throne, with his legs casually crossed in front of him. He was wearing jeans, a dark jacket that belted at the waist, and old, run-down cowboy boots. On his jacket was a button that showed a pig's head with a bullethole between the eyes. In his lap this newcomer held a draw-string bag. He rose, standing in the seat of the throne like a child in daddy's chair, and the smile dropped away from his face like loose skin. Now his eyes blazed, and his lips parted over vast, hungry teeth.

*"Get them, Andrew! Get them! Kill them! Every sister-fucking one of them!"*

*"My life for you!"* the man in the alcove screamed, and for the first time Jake saw the machine-gun propped in the corner. Tick-Tock sprang for it and snatched it up.

*"My life for you!"*

He turned, and Oy was on him once again, leaping forward and up-ward, sinking his teeth deep into Tick-Tock's left thigh, just below the crotch.

Eddie and Susannah drew in unison, each raising one of Roland's big guns. They fired in concert, not even the smallest overlap in the sound of their shots. One of them tore off the top of Tick-Tock's miserable head, buried itself in the equipment, and created a loud but mercifully brief snarl of feedback. The other took him in the throat.

He staggered forward one step, then two. Oy dropped to the floor and backed away from him, snarling. A third step took Tick-Tock out into the throneroom proper. He raised his arms toward Jake, and the boy could read Ticky's hatred in his remaining green eye; the boy thought he could hear the man's last, hateful thought: *Oh, you fucking little squint—*

Then Tick-Tock collapsed forward, as he had collapsed in the Cradle of the Grays . . . only this time he would rise no more.

"Thus fell Lord Perth, and the earth did shake with that thunder," said the man on



the throne.

*Except he's not a man, Jake thought. Not a man at all. We've found the Wizard at last, I think. And I'm pretty sure I know what's in the bag he has.*

"Marten," Roland said. He held out his left hand, the one which was still whole.

"Marten Broadcloak. After all these years. After all these *centuries*."

"Want this, Roland?"

Eddie put the gun he had used to kill the Tick-Tock Man in Roland's hand. A tendril of blue smoke was still rising from the barrel. Roland looked at the old revolver as if he had never seen it before, then slowly lifted it and pointed it at the grinning, rosy-cheeked figure sitting cross-legged on the Green Palace's throne.

"Finally," Roland breathed, thumbing back the trigger. "Finally in my sights."

## 8

"That six-shooter will do you no good, as I think you know," the man on the throne said. "Not against *me*. Only misfires against *me*, Roland, old fellow. How's the family, by the way? I seem to have lost touch with them over the years. I was always such a *lousy* correspondent. Someone ought to take a hosswhip to me, aye, so they should!"

He threw back his head and laughed. Roland pulled the trigger of the gun in his hand. When the hammer fell there was only a dull click.

"Toadjer," the man on the throne said. "I think you must have gotten some of those wet slugs in there by accident, don't you? The ones with the flat powder? Good for blocking the sound of the thinny, but not so good for shooting old wizards, are they? Too bad. And your hand, Roland, look at your *hand!* Short a couple of fingers, by the look. My, this *has* been hard on you, hasn't it? Things could get easier, though. You and your friends could have a fine, fruitful life—and, as Jake would say, that is the truth. No more lobsterosities, no more mad trains, no more disquiet-ing—not to mention dangerous—trips to other worlds. All you have to do is give over this stupid and hopeless quest for the Tower."

"No," Eddie said.

"No," Susannah said.

"No," Jake said.

"No!" Oy said, and added a bark.

The dark man on the green throne continued to smile, unperturbed. "Roland?" he asked. "What about you?" Slowly, he raised the drawstring bag. It looked dusty and old. It hung from the wizard's fist like a teardrop, and now the thing in its pouch began to pulse with pink light. "Cry off, and they need never see what's inside this—they need never see the last scene of that sad long-ago play. Cry off. Turn from the Tower and go your way."

"No," Roland said. He began to smile, and as his smile broadened, that of the man sitting on the throne began to falter. "You can enchant my guns, those of this world, I reckon," he said.

"Roland, I don't know what you're thinking of, laddie, but I warn you not to—" "Not to cross Oz the Great? Oz the Powerful? But I think I will, Marten ... or Maerlyn ... or whoever you call yourself now..."

"Flagg, actually," the man on the throne said. "And we've met before." He smiled. Instead of broadening his face, as smiles usually did, it contracted Flagg's features into a narrow and spiteful grimace. "In the wreck of Gilead. You and your surviving pals—that laughing donkey Cuthbert Allgood made one of your party, I remember, and DeCurry, the fellow with the birthmark, made another—were on your way west, to seek the Tower. Or, in the parlance of Jake's world, you were off to see the Wizard. I know you saw me, but I doubt you knew until now that I saw you, as well."

"And will again, I reckon," Roland said. "Unless, that is, I kill you now and put an end to your interference."

Still holding his own gun out in his left hand, he went for the one tucked in the waistband of his jeans—Jake's Ruger, a gun from another world and perhaps immune to this creature's enchantments—with his right. And he was fast as he had always been fast, his speed blinding.

The man on the throne shrieked and cringed back. The bag fell from his lap, and the glass ball—once held by Rhea, once held by Jonas, once held by Roland himself—slipped out of its mouth. Smoke, green this time instead of red, billowed from the slots in the arms of the throne. It rose in obscuring fumes. Yet Roland still might have shot the figure disappearing into the smoke if he had made a clean draw. He didn't, however; the Ruger slid in the grip of his reduced hand, then twisted. The front sight caught on his belt-buckle. It took only an extra quarter-second for him to free the snag, but that was the quarter-second he had needed. He

pumped three shots into the billowing smoke, then ran forward, oblivious of the shouts of the others.

He waved the smoke aside with his hands. His shots had shattered the back of the throne into thick green slabs of glass, but the man-shaped creature which had called itself Flagg was gone. Roland found himself already beginning to wonder if he—or it had been there in the first place.

The ball was still there, however, unharmed and glowing the same enticing pink he remembered from so long ago—from Mejis, when he had been young and in love. This survivor of Maerlyn's Rainbow had rolled almost to the edge of the throne's seat; two more inches and it would have plunged over and shattered on the floor. Yet it had not; still it remained, this bewitched thing Susan Delgado had first glimpsed through the window of Rhea's hut, under the light of the Kissing Moon.

Roland picked it up—how well it fit his hand, how natural it felt against his palm, even after all these years—and looked into its cloudy, troubled depths. "You always did have a charmed life," he whispered to it. He thought of Rhea as he had seen her in this ball—her ancient, laughing eyes. He thought of the flames from the Reap-Night bonfire rising around Susan, making her beauty shimmer in the heat. Making it shiver like a mirage.

*Wretched glam!* he thought. *If I dashed you to the floor, surely we would drown in the sea of tears that would pour out of your split belly . . . the tears of all those you've put to ruin.*

And why not do it? Left whole, the nasty thing might be able to help them back to the Path of the Beam, but Roland didn't believe they actually *needed* it. He thought that Tick-Tock and the creature which had called itself Flagg had been their last challenge in that regard. The Green Palace was their door back to Mid-World ... and it was theirs, now. They had conquered it by force of arms.

*But you can't go yet, gunslinger. Not until you've finished your story, told the last scene.*

Whose voice was that? Vannay's? No. Cort's? No. Nor was it the voice of his father, who had once turned him naked out of a whore's bed. That was the hardest voice, the one he often heard in his troubled dreams, the one he wanted so to please and so seldom could. No, not that voice, not this time.

This time what he heard was the voice *of ka—ka* like a wind. He had told so much

of that awful fourteenth year ... but he hadn't finished the tale. As with Detta Walker and the Blue Lady's forspecial plate, there was one more thing. A hidden thing. The question wasn't, he saw, whether or not the five of them could find their way out of the Green Palace and re-cover the Path of the Beam; the question was whether or not they could go on as *ka-tet*. If they were to do that, there could be nothing hidden; he would have to tell them of the final time he had looked into the wizard's glass in that long-ago year. Three nights past the welcoming banquet, it had been. He would have to tell them—

*No, Roland, the voice whispered. Not just tell. Not this time. You know better.*

Yes. He knew better.

"Come," he said, turning to them.

They drew slowly around him, their eyes wide and filling with the ball's flashing pink light. Already they were half-hypnotized by it, even Oy.

"We are *ka-tet*," Roland said, holding the ball toward them. "We are one from many. I lost my one true love at the beginning of my quest for the Dark Tower. Now look into this wretched thing, if you would, and see what I lost not long after. See it once and for all; see it very well."

They looked. The ball, cupped in Roland's upraised hands, began to pulse faster. It gathered them in and swept them away. Caught and whirled in the grip of that pink storm, they flew over the Wizard's Rain-bow to the Gilead that had been.

## CHAPTER. IV

### the glass

*Jake of New York stands in an upper corridor of the Great Hall of Gilead—more castles, here in the green land, than Mayor's House. He looks around and sees Susannah and Eddie standing by a tapestry, their eyes big, their hands tightly entwined. And Susannah is standing; she has her legs back, at least for now, and what she called "cappies " have been replaced by a pair of ruby slippers exactly like those Dorothy wore when she stepped out upon her version of the Great Road to find the Wizard of Oz, that bumhug.*

*She has her legs because this is a dream, Jake thinks, but knows it is no dream. He looks down and sees Oy looking up at him with his anxious, intelligent, gold-ringed eyes. He is still wearing the red booties. Jake bends and strokes Oy 's head. The feel of the humbler's fur under his hand is clear and real. No, this isn't a dream.*

*Yet Roland is not here, he realizes; they are four instead of five. He realizes something else as well: the air of this corridor is faintly pink, and small pink halos revolve around the funny, old-fashioned lightbulbs that illuminate the corridor. Something is going to happen; some story is go-ing to play out in front of their eyes. And now, as if the very thought had summoned them, the boy hears the click of approaching footfalls.*

*It's a story I know, Jake thinks. One I've been told before.*

*As Roland comes around the corner, he realizes what story it is: the one where Marten Broadcloak stops Roland as Roland passes by on his way to the rooftop, where it will perhaps be cooler. "You, boy, " Marten will say. "Come in! Don't stand in the hall! Your mother wants to speak to you. " But of course that isn't the truth, was never the truth, will never be the truth, no matter how much time slips and bends. What Marten wants is for the boy to see his mother, and to understand that Gabrielle Deschain has become the mistress of his father's wizard. Marten wants to goad the boy into an early test of manhood while his father is away and can't put a stop to it; he wants to get the puppy out of his way before it can grow teeth long enough to bite.*

*Now they will see all this; the sad comedy will go its sad and pre-ordained course in front of their eyes. I'm too young, Jake thinks, but of course he is not too young; Roland will be only three years older when he comes to Mejis with his friends and meets Susan upon the Great Road. Only three years older when he loves her; only three years older when he loses her.*

I don't care, I don't want to see it—

*And won't, he realizes as Roland draws closer; all that has already happened. For this is not August, the time of Full Earth, but late fall or early winter. He can tell by the serape Roland wears, a souvenir of his trip to the Outer Arc, and by the vapor that smokes from his mouth and nose each time he exhales: no central heating in Gilead, and it's cold up here.*

*There are other changes as well: Roland is now wearing the guns which are his birthright, the big ones with the sandalwood grips. His father passed them on at the banquet, Jake thinks. He doesn't know how he knows this, but he does. And Roland's face, although still that of a boy, is not the open, untried face of the one who idled up this same corridor five months before; the boy who was ensnared by Marten has been through much since then, and his battle with Cort has been the very least of it.*

*Jake sees something else, too: the boy gunslinger is wearing the red cowboy boots. He doesn't know it, though. Because this isn't really happening.*

*Yet somehow it is. They are inside the wizard's glass, they are inside the pink storm (those pink halos revolving around the light fixtures re-mind Jake of The Falls of the Hounds, and the moonbows revolving in the mist), and this is happening all over again.*

*"Roland!" Eddie calls from where he and Susannah stand by the tapestry.*

*Susannah gasps and squeezes his shoulder, wanting him to be silent, but Eddie ignores her. "No, Roland! Don't! Bad idea! " "No! Olan!" Oy yaps.*

*Roland ignores both of them, and he passes by Jake a hand's breadth away without seeing him. For Roland, they are not here; red boots or no red boots, this ka-tet is far in his future.*

*He stops at a door near the end of the corridor, hesitates, then raises his fist and knocks. Eddie starts down the corridor toward him, still holding Susannah's hand... now he looks almost as if he is dragging her.*

*"Come on, Jake, " says Eddie.*

*"No, I don't want to."*

*"It's not about what you want, and you know it. We're supposed to see. If we can't stop him, we can at least do what we came here to do. Now come on!"*

*Heart heavy with dread, his stomach clenched in a knot, Jake comes along. As they approach Roland—the guns look enormous on his slim hips, and his unlined*

*but already tired face somehow makes Jake feel like weeping—the gunslinger knocks again.*

*"She ain't there, sugar!" Susannah shouts at him. "She ain't there or she ain't answering the door, and which one it is don't matter to you! Leave it! Leave her! She ain't worth it! Just bein your mother don't make her worth it! Go away!" But he doesn't hear her, either, and he doesn't go away. As Jake, Eddie, Susannah, and Oy gather unseen behind him, Roland tries the door to his mother's room and finds it unlocked. He opens it, revealing a shadowy chamber decorated with silk hangings. On the floor is a rug that looks like the Persians beloved of Jake's mother . . . only this rug, Jake knows, comes from the Province of Kashamin. On the far side of the parlor, by a window which has been shuttered against the winter winds, Jake sees a low-backed chair and knows it is the one she was in on the day of Roland's manhood test; it is where she was sitting when her son observed the love-bite on her neck.*

*The chair is empty now, but as the gunslinger takes another step into the room and turns to look toward the apartment's bedroom, Jake observes a pair of shoes—black, not red—beneath the drapes flanking the shuttered window.*

*"Roland!" he shouts. "Roland, behind the drapes! Someone behind the drapes! Look out!"*

*But Roland doesn't hear.*

*"Mother?" he calls, and even his voice is the same, Jake would know it anywhere . . . but it is such a magically freshened version of it! Young and uncracked by all the years of dust and wind and cigarette smoke. "Mother, it's Roland! I want to talk to you!"*

*Still no answer. He walks down the short hall which leads to the bed-room. Part of Jake wants to stay here in the parlor, to go to that drape and yank it aside, but he knows this isn't the way it's supposed to go. Even if he tried, he doubts it would do any good; his hand would likely pass right through, like the hand of a ghost.*

*"Come on," Eddie says. "Stay with him."*

*They go in a cluster that might have been comic under other circumstances. Not under these; here it is a case of three people desperate for the comfort of friends. Roland stands looking at the bed against the room's left wall. He looks at it as if hypnotized. Perhaps he is trying to imagine Marten in it with his mother; perhaps he is remembering Susan, with whom he never slept in a proper bed, let alone a*

*canopied luxury such as this. Jake can see the gunslinger's dim profile in a three-paneled mirror across the room, in an alcove. This triple glass stands in front of a small table the boy recognizes from his mother's side of his parents' bedroom; it is a vanity.*

*The gunslinger shakes himself and comes back from whatever thoughts have seized his mind. On his feet are those terrible boots; in this dim light, they look like the boots of a man who has walked through a creek of blood.*

*"Mother!"*

*He takes a step toward the bed and actually bends a little, as if he thinks she might be hiding under it. If she's been hiding, however, it wasn't there; the shoes which Jake saw beneath the drape were women's shoes, and the shape which now stands at the end of the short corridor, just out-side the bedroom door, is wearing a dress. Jake can see its hem.*

*And he sees more than that. Jake understands Roland's troubled relationship with his mother and father better than Eddie or Susannah ever could, because Jake's own parents are peculiarly like them: Elmer Chambers is a gunslinger for the Network, and Megan Chambers has a long history of sleeping with sick friends. This is nothing Jake has been told, but he knows, somehow; he has shared khex with his mother and father, and he knows what he knows.*

*He knows something about Roland, as well: that he saw his mother in the wizard's glass. It was Gabrielle Deschain, fresh back from her retreat in Debaria, Gabrielle who would confess to her husband the errors of her ways and her thinking after the banquet, who would cry his pardon and beg to be taken back to his bed. . . and, when Steven drowsed after their lovemaking, she would bury the knife in his breast . . . or perhaps only lightly scratch his arm with it, not even waking him. With that knife, it would come to the same either way.*

*Roland had seen it all in the glass before finally turning the wretched thing over to his father, and Roland had put a stop to it. To save Steven Deschain 's life, Eddie and Susannah would have said, had they seen so far into the business, but Jake has the unhappy wisdom of unhappy children and sees further. To save his mother's life as well. To give her one last chance to recover her sanity, one last chance to stand at her husband's side and be true. One last chance to repent of Marten Broadcloak.*

*Surely she will, surely she must! Roland saw her face that day, how unhappy she*



*was, and surely she must! Surely she cannot have chosen the magician! If he can only make her see . . .*

*So, unaware that he has once more lapsed into the unwisdom of the very young—Roland cannot grasp that unhappiness and shame are often no match for desire—he has come here to speak to his mother, to beg her to come back to her husband before it's too late. He has saved her from herself once, he will tell her, but he cannot do it again.*

*And if she still won't go, Jake thinks, or tries to brave it out, pretend she doesn't know what he's talking about, he'll give her a choice: leave Gilead with his help—now, tonight—or be clapped in chains tomorrow morning, a traitor so outrageous she will almost certainly be hung as Hax the cook was hung.*

*"Mother?" he calls, still unaware of the shape standing in the shadows behind him. He takes one further step into the room, and now the shape moves. The shape raises its hands. There is something in its hands. Not a gun, Jake can tell that much, but it has a deadly look to it, a snaky look, somehow—*

*"Roland, watch out!" Susannah shrieks, and her voice is like a magical switch. There is something on the dressing table—the glass, of course;*

*Gabrielle has stolen it, it's what she 'll bring to her lover as a consolation prize for the murder her son prevented—and now it lights as if in response to Susannah's voice. It sprays brilliant pink light up the triple mirror and casts its glow back into the room. In that light, in that triple glass, Roland finally sees the figure behind him.*

*"Christ!" Eddie Dean shrieks, horrified. "Oh Christ, Roland! That's not your mother! That's—"*

*It's not even a woman, not really, not anymore; it is a kind of living corpse in a road-filthy black dress. There are only a few straggling tufts of hair left on her head and there's a gaping hole where her nose used to be, but her eyes still blaze, and the snake she holds wriggling between her hands is very lively. Even in his own horror, Jake has time to wonder if she got it from under the same rock where she found the one Roland killed.*

*It is Rhea who has been waiting for the gunslinger in his mother's apartment; it is the Coos, come not just to retrieve her glam but to finish with the boy who has caused her so much trouble.*

*"Now, ye trollop's get!" she cries shrilly, cackling. "Now ye'll pay!"*

*But Roland has seen her, in the glass he has seen her, Rhea betrayed by the very ball she came to take back, and now he is whirling, his hands dropping to his new guns with all their deadly speed. He is fourteen, his reflexes are the sharpest and quickest they 'll ever be, and he goes off like exploding gunpowder.*

*"No, Roland, don't!" Susannah screams. "It's a trick, it's a glam!"*

*Jake has just time to look from the mirror to the woman actually standing in the doorway; has just time to realize he, too, has been tricked.*

*Perhaps Roland also understands the truth at the last split-second— that the woman in the doorway really is his mother after all, that the thing in her hands isn't a snake but a belt, something she has made for him, a peace offering, mayhap, that the glass has lied to him in the only way it can...by reflection.*

*In any case, it's too late. The guns are out and thundering, their bright yellow flashes lighting the room. He pulls the trigger of each gun twice before he can stop, and the four slugs drive Gabrielle Deschain back into the corridor with the hopeful can-we-make-peace smile still on her face.*

*She dies that way, smiling.*

*Roland stands where he is, the smoking guns in his hands, his face cramped in a grimace of surprise and horror, just beginning to get the truth of what he must carry with him the rest of his life: he has used the guns of his father to kill his mother.*

*Now cackling laughter fills the room. Roland does not turn; he is frozen by the woman in the blue dress and black shoes who lies bleeding in the corridor of her apartment; the woman he came to save and has killed, instead. She lies with the hand-woven belt draped across her bleed-ing stomach.*

*Jake turns for him, and is not surprised to see a green-faced woman in a pointed black hat swimming inside the hall. It is the Wicked Witch of the East; it is also, he knows, Rhea of the Coos. She stares at the boy with the guns in his hands and bares her teeth at him in the most terrible grin Jake has ever seen in his life.*

*"I've burned the stupid girl ye loved—aye, burned her alive, I did— and now I've made ye a matricide. Do ye repent of killing my snake yet, gunslinger? My poor, sweet Ermot? Do ye regret playing yer hard games with one more trig than ye 'll ever be in yer miserable life? "*

*He gives no sign that he hears, only stares at his lady mother. Soon he will go to her, kneel by her, but not yet; not yet.*

*The face in the ball now turns toward the three pilgrims, and as it does it changes, becomes old and bald and raddled—becomes, in fact, the face Roland saw in the lying mirror. The gunslinger has been unable to see his future friends, but Rhea sees them; aye, she sees them very well.*

*"Cry it off! " she croaks—it is the caw of a raven sitting on a leafless branch beneath a winter-dimmed sky. "Cry it off! Renounce the Tower!"*

*"Never, you bitch, " Eddie says.*

*"Ye see what he is! What a monster he is! And this is only the beginning of it, ye ken! Ask him what happened to Cuthbert! To Alain—Alain 's touch, clever as 'twas, saved him not in the end, so it didn't! Ask him what happened to Jamie De Curry! He never had a friend he didn't kill, never had a lover who's not dust in the wind!"*

*"Go your way, " Susannah says, "and leave us to ours. "*

*Rhea's green, cracked lips twist in a horrible sneer. "He's killed his own mother! What will he do to you, ye stupid brown-skinned bitch ? "*

*"He didn't kill her, " Jake said. "You killed her. Now go!"*

*Jake takes a step toward the ball, meaning to pick it up and dash it to the floor . . . and he can do that, he realizes, for the ball is real. It's the one thing in this vision that is. But before he can put his hands to it, it flashes a soundless explosion of pink light. Jake throws his hands up in front of his face to keep from being blinded, and then he is*

*(melting I'm melting what a world oh what a world)*

*falling, he is being whirled down through the pink storm, out of Oz and back to Kansas, out of Oz and back to Kansas, out of Oz and back to—*

# CHAPTER V

## THE PATH OF THE BEAM

1

"—home," Eddie muttered. His voice sounded thick and punch-drunk to his own ears. "Back home, because there's no place like home, no indeed."

He tried to open his eyes and at first couldn't. It was as if they were glued shut. He put the heel of his hand to his forehead and pushed up, tightening the skin on his face. It worked; his eyes popped open. He saw neither the throneroom of the Green Palace nor (and this was what he had really expected) the richly appointed but somehow claustrophobic bed-room in which he had just been.

He was outside, lying in a small clearing of winter-white grass. Nearby was a little grove of trees, some still with their last brown leaves clinging to the branches. And one branch with an odd white leaf, an al-bino leaf. There was a pretty trickle of running water farther into the grove. Standing abandoned in the high grass was Susannah's new and im-proved wheelchair. There was mud on the tires, Eddie saw, and a few late leaves, crispy and brown, caught in the spokes. A few swatches of grass, too. Overhead was a skyful of still white clouds, every bit as interesting as a laundry-basket full of sheets.

*The sky was clear when we went inside the Palace*, he thought, and realized time had slipped again. How much or how little, he wasn't sure he wanted to know—Roland's world was like a transmission with its gear-teeth all but stripped away; you never knew when time was going to pop into neutral or race you away in overdrive.

*Was this Roland's world, though?* And if it was, how had they gotten back to it? "How should I know?" Eddie croaked, and got slowly to his feet, wincing as he did so. He didn't think he was hungover, but his legs were sore and he felt as if he

had just taken the world's heaviest Sunday after-noon nap.

Roland and Susannah lay on the ground under the trees. The gunslinger was stirring, but Susannah lay on her back, arms spread extravagantly wide, snoring in an unladylike way that made Eddie grin. Jake was nearby, with Oy sleeping on his side by one of the kid's knees. As Eddie looked at them, Jake opened his eyes and sat up. His gaze was wide but blank; he was awake, but had been so heavily asleep he didn't know it yet.

"Gruz," Jake said, and yawned.

"Yep," Eddie said, "that works for me." He turned in a slow circle, and had gotten three quarters of the way back to where he'd started when he saw the Green Palace on the horizon. From here it looked very small, and its brilliance had been robbed by the sunless day. Eddie guessed it might be thirty miles away. Leading toward them from that direction were the tracks of Susannah's wheelchair.

He could hear the thinny, but faintly. He thought he could see it, as well—a quicksilver shimmer like bogwater, stretching across the flat, open land . . . and finally drying up about five miles away. Five miles west of here? Given the location of the Green Palace and the fact that they had been travelling east on 1-70, that was the natural assumption, but who really knew, especially with no visible sun to use for orientation?

"Where's the turnpike?" Jake asked. His voice sounded thick and gummy. Oy joined him, stretching first one rear leg, then the other. Eddie saw he had lost one of his booties at some point.

"Maybe it was cancelled due to lack of interest."

"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," Jake said. Eddie looked at him sharply, but didn't believe the kid was consciously riffing on *The Wizard of Oz*. "Not the one where the Kansas City Royals play, not the one where the Monarchs play, either."

"What gives you that idea?"

Jake hoisted a thumb toward the sky, and when Eddie looked up, he saw that he had been wrong: it wasn't *all* still white overcast, boring as a basket of sheets. Directly above their heads, a band of clouds was moiling toward the horizon as steadily as a conveyor belt.

They were back on the Path of the Beam.

"Eddie? Where you at, sugar?"

Eddie looked down from the lane of clouds in the sky and saw Susan-nah sitting up, rubbing the back of her neck. She looked unsure of where she was. Perhaps even of *who* she was. The red cappies she was wearing looked oddly dull in this light, but they were still the brightest things in Eddie's view ... until he looked down at his own feet and saw the street-boppers with their Cuban heels. Yet these also looked dull, and Eddie no longer thought it was just the day's cloudy light that made them seem so. He looked at Jake's shoes, Oy's remaining three slippers, Roland's cow-boy boots (the gunslinger was sitting up now, arms crossed around his knees, looking blankly off into the distance). All the same ruby red, but a *lifeless* red, somehow. As if some magic essential to them had been used up. Suddenly, Eddie wanted them off his feet.

He sat down beside Susannah, gave her a kiss, and said: "Good morning, Sleeping Beauty. Or afternoon, if it's that." Then, quickly, almost hating to touch them (it was like touching dead skin, somehow), Eddie yanked off the street-boppers. As he did, he saw that they were scuffed at the toes and muddy at the heels, no longer new looking. He'd wondered how they'd gotten here; now, feeling the ache in the muscles of his legs and remembering the wheelchair tracks, he knew. They had walked, by God. Walked in their sleep.

"That," Susannah said, "is the best idea you've had since . . . well, in a long time." She stripped off the cappies. Close by, Eddie saw Jake tak-ing off Oy's booties. "Were we there?" Susannah asked him. "Eddie, were we really there when he..." "When I killed my mother," Roland said. "Yes, you were there. As I was. Gods help me, I was there. I did it." He covered his face with his hands and began to voice a series of harsh sobs.

Susannah crawled across to him in that agile way that was almost a version of walking. She put an arm around him and used her other hand to take his hands away from his face. At first Roland didn't want to let her do that, but she was persistent, and at last his hands—those killer's hands—came down, revealing haunted eyes which swam with tears.

Susannah urged his face down against her shoulder. "Be easy, Roland," she said. "Be easy and let it go. This part is over now. You past it."

"A man doesn't get past such a thing," Roland said. "No, I don't think so. Not ever."

"You didn't kill her," Eddie said.

"That's too easy." The gunslinger's face was still against Susannah's shoulder, but his words were clear enough. "Some responsibilities can't be shirked. Some *sins* can't be shirked. Yes, Rhea was there—in a way, at least—but I can't shift it all to the Coos, much as I might like to."

"It wasn't her, either," Eddie said. "That's not what I mean."

Roland raised his head. "What in hell's name are you talking about?"

"*Ka*," Eddie said. "*Ka* like a wind."

### 3

In their packs there was food none of them had put there—cookies with Keebler elves on the packages, Saran Wrapped sandwiches that looked like the kind you could get (if you were desperate, that was) from turnpike vending machines, and a brand of cola neither Eddie, Susannah, nor Jake knew. It tasted like Coke and came in a red and white can, but the brand was Nozz-A-La.

They ate a meal with their backs to the grove and their faces to the distant glimmer of the Green Palace, and called it lunch. *If we start to lose the light in an hour or so, we can make it supper by voice vote*, Eddie thought, but he didn't believe they'd need to. His interior clock was running again now, and that mysterious but usually accurate device suggested that it was early afternoon. At one point he stood up and raised his soda, smiling into an invisible camera. "When I'm travelling through the Land of Oz in my new Takuro Spirit, I drink Nozz-A-La!" he proclaimed. "It fills me up but never fills me out! It makes me happy to be a man! It makes me know God! It gives me the outlook of an angel and the balls of a tiger! When I drink Nozz-A-La, I say 'Gosh! Ain't I glad to be alive!' I say—"

"Sit down, you bumhug," Jake said, laughing.

"Ug," Oy agreed. His snout was on Jake's ankle, and he was watching the boy's sandwich with great interest.

Eddie started to sit, and then that strange albino leaf caught his eye again. *That's no leaf*, he thought, and walked over to it. No, not a leaf but a scrap of paper. He

turned it over and saw columns of "blah blah" and "yak yak" and "all the stuff's the same." Usually newspapers weren't blank on one side, but Eddie wasn't surprised to find this **one** was—the *Oz Daily Buzz* had only been a prop, after all. Nor was the blank side blank. Printed on it in neat, careful letters, was this message:

☺ Next time I won't leave. Renounce the Tower. This is your last warning. ☺  
And have a great day! —R.F.

Below that, a little drawing:



Eddie brought the note back to where the others were eating. Each of them looked at it. Roland held it last, ran his thumb over it thoughtfully, feeling the texture of the paper, then gave it back to Eddie.

"R.F.," Eddie said. "The man who was running Tick-Tock. This is from him, isn't it?"

"Yes. He must have brought the Tick-Tock Man out of Lud."

"Sure," Jake said darkly. "That guy Flagg looked like someone who'd know a first-class bumhug when he found one. But how did they get here before us? What could be faster than Blaine the Mono, for cripe's sake?"

"A door," Eddie said. "Maybe they came through one of those special doors."

"Bingo," Susannah said. She held her hand out, palm up, and Eddie slapped it.

"In any case, what he suggests is not bad advice," Roland said. "I urge you to



consider it most seriously. And if you want to go back to your world, I will allow you to go."

"Roland, I can't believe you," Eddie said. "This, after you dragged me and Suze over here, kicking and screaming? You know what my brother would say about you? That you're as contrary as a hog on ice-skates."

"I did what I did before I learned to know you as friends," Roland said. "Before I learned to love you as I loved Alain and Cuthbert. And before I was forced to ... to revisit certain scenes. Doing that has ..." He paused, looking down at his feet (he had put his old boots back on again) and thinking hard. At last he looked up again. "There was a part of me that hadn't moved or spoken in a good many years. I thought it was dead. It isn't. I have learned to love again, and I'm aware that this is probably my last chance to love. I'm slow—Vannay and Cort knew that; so did my father—but I'm not stupid."

"Then don't act that way," Eddie said. "Or treat us as if we were."

"What you call 'the bottom line,' Eddie, is this: I get my friends killed. And I'm not sure I can even risk doing that again. Jake especially. . . I. . . never mind. I don't have the words. For the first time since I turned around in a dark room and killed my mother, I may have found something more important than the Tower. Leave it at that."

"All right, I guess I can respect that."

"So can I," Susannah said, "but Eddie's right about *ka*." She took the note and ran a finger over it thoughtfully. "Roland, you can't talk about that—*ka*, I mean—then turn around and take it back again, just because you get a little low on willpower and dedication."

"Willpower and dedication are good words," Roland remarked. "There's a bad one, though, that means the same thing. That one is *obsession*."

She shrugged it away with an impatient twitch of her shoulders. "Sugarpie, either this whole business is *ka*, or none of it is. And scary as *ka* might be—the idea of fate with eagle eyes and a bloodhound's nose—I find the idea of no *ka* even scarier." She tossed the R.F. note aside on the matted grass.

"Whatever you call it, you're just as dead if it runs you over," Roland said. "Rimer . . . Thorin . . . Jonas . . . my mother . . . Cuthbert . . . Susan. Just ask them. Any of them. If you only could."

"You're missing the biggest part of this," Eddie said. "You *can't* send us back.

Don't you realize that, you big galoot? Even if there was a door, we wouldn't go through it. Am I wrong about that?"

He looked at Jake and Susannah. They shook their heads. Even Oy shook his head. No, he wasn't wrong.

"We've *changed*," Eddie said. "We..." Now he was the one who didn't know how to go on. How to express his need to see the Tower . . . and his other need, just as strong, to go on carrying the gun with the sandal-wood insets. *The big iron* was how he'd come to think of it. Like in that old Marty Robbins song about the man with the big iron on his hip. "It's *ka*," he said. It was all he could think of that was big enough to cover it.

"Kaka," Roland replied, after a moment's consideration. The three of them stared at him, mouths open. Roland of Gilead had made a joke.

#### 4

"There's one thing I don't understand about what we saw," Susannah said hesitantly. "Why did your mother hide behind that drape when you came in, Roland? Did she mean to..." She bit her lip, then brought it out. "Did she mean to kill you?"

"If she'd meant to kill me, she wouldn't have chosen a belt as her weapon. The very fact that she had made me a present—and that's what it was, it had my initials woven into it—suggests that she meant to ask my forgiveness. That she had had a change of heart."

*Is that what you know, or only what you want to believe?* Eddie thought. It was a question he would never ask. Roland had been tested enough, had won their way back to the Path of the Beam by reliving that terrible final visit to his mother's apartment, and that was enough.

"I think she hid because she was ashamed," the gunslinger said. "Or because she needed a moment to think of what to say to me. Of how to explain."

"And the ball?" Susannah asked him gently. "Was it on the vanity table, where we saw it? And did she steal it from your father?"

"Yes to both," Roland said. "Although . . . *did* she steal it?" He seemed to ask this question of himself. "My father knew a great many things, but he sometimes kept what he knew to himself."

"Like him knowing that your mother and Marten were seeing each other," Susannah said.

"Yes."

"But, Roland . . . you surely don't believe that your father would knowingly have allowed *you* to . . . to . . ."

Roland looked at her with large, haunted eyes. His tears had gone, but when he tried to smile at her question, he was unable. "Have knowingly allowed his son to kill his wife?" he asked. "No, I can't say that. Much as I'd like to, I can't. That he should have *caused* such a thing to have hap-pened, to have deliberately set it in motion, like a man playing Castles . . . that I cannot believe. But would he allow *ka* to run its course? Aye, most certainly."

"What happened to the ball?" Jake asked.

"I don't know. I fainted. When I awoke, my mother and I were still alone, one dead and one alive. No one had come to the sound of the shots—the walls of that place were thick stone, and that wing mostly empty as well. Her blood had dried. The belt she'd made me was covered with it, but I took it, and I put it on. I wore that bloodstained gift for many years, and how I lost it is a tale for another day—I'll tell it to you before we have done, for it bears on my quest for the Tower. "But although no one had come to investigate the gunshots, someone had come for another reason. While I lay fainted away by my mother's corpse, that someone came in and took the wizard's glass away."

"Rhea?" Eddie asked.

"I doubt she was so close in her body . . . but she had a way of making friends, that one. Aye, a way of making friends. I saw her again, you know." Roland explained no further, but a stony gleam arose in his eyes. Eddie had seen it before, and knew it meant killing.

Jake had retrieved the note from R.F. and now gestured at the little drawing beneath the message. "Do you know what this means?"

"I have an idea it's the *sigul* of a place I saw when I first travelled in the wizard's glass. The land called Thunderclap." He looked around at them, one by one. "I think it's there that we'll meet this man—this *thing*—named Flagg again."

Roland looked back the way they had come, sleepwalking in their fine red shoes.

"The Kansas we came through was *his* Kansas, and the plague that emptied out that land was *his* plague. At least, that's what I believe."

"But it might not stay there," Susannah said.

"It could travel," Eddie said.

"To *our* world," Jake said.

Still looking back toward the Green Palace, Roland said: "To your world, or any other."

"Who's the Crimson King?" Susannah asked abruptly.

"Susannah, I know not."

They were quiet, then, watching Roland look toward the palace where he had faced a false wizard and a true memory and somehow opened the door back to his own world by so doing.

*Our world*, Eddie thought, slipping an arm around Susannah. *Our world now. If we go back to America, and perhaps we'll have to before this is over, we 'll arrive as strangers in a strange land, no matter what when it is. This is our world now. The world of the Beams, and the Guardians, and the Dark Tower.*

"We got some daylight left," he said to Roland, and put a hesitant hand on the gunslinger's shoulder. When Roland immediately covered it with his own hand, Eddie smiled. "You want to use it, or what?"

"Yes," Roland said. "Let's use it." He bent and shouldered his pack.

"What about the shoes?" Susannah asked, looking doubtfully at the little red pile they had made.

"Leave them here," Eddie said. "They've served their purpose. Into your wheelchair, girl." He put his arms around her and helped her in.

"All God's children have shoes," Roland mused. "Isn't that what you said, Susannah?"

"Well," she said, settling herself, "the correct dialect adds a soupcon of flavor, but you've got the essence, honey, yes."

"Then we'll undoubtedly find more shoes as God wills it," Roland said.

Jake was looking into his knapsack, taking inventory of the foodstuffs that had been added by some unknown hand. He held up a chicken leg in a Baggie, looked at it, then looked at Eddie. "Who do you suppose packed this stuff?"

Eddie raised his eyebrows, as if to ask Jake how he could possibly be so stupid.

"The Keebler Elves," he said. "Who else? Come on, let's go."

They clustered near the grove, five wanderers on the face of an empty land. Ahead of them, running across the plain, was a line in the grass which exactly matched the lane of rushing clouds in the sky. This line was nothing so obvious as a path . . . but to the awakened eye, the way that everything bent in the same direction was as clear as a painted stripe.

The Path of the Beam. Somewhere ahead, where this Beam inter-sected all the others, stood the Dark Tower. Eddie thought that, if the wind were right, he would almost be able to smell its sullen stone.

And roses—the dusky scent of roses.

He took Susannah's hand as she sat in her chair; Susannah took Roland's; Roland took Jake's. Oy stood two paces before them, head up, scenting the autumn air that combed his fur with unseen fingers, his gold-ringed eyes wide.

"We are *ka-tet*," Eddie said. It crossed his mind to wonder at how much he'd changed; how he had become a stranger, even to himself. "We are one from many."

"*Ka-tet*," Susannah said. "We are one from many."

"One from many," Jake said. "Come on, let's go."

*Bird and bear and hare and fish*, Eddie thought.

With Oy in the lead, they once more set out for the Dark Tower, walking along the Path of the Beam.

## AFTERWORD



The scene in which Roland bests his old teacher, Cort, and goes off to roister in the less savory section of Gilead was written in the spring of 1970. The one in which Roland's father shows up the following morning was written in the summer of 1996. Although only sixteen hours pass between the two occurrences in the world of the story, twenty-six *years* had passed in the life of the story's teller. Yet the moment finally came, and I found myself confronting myself across a whore's bed—the unemployed schoolboy with the long black hair and beard on one side, the successful popular novelist ("America's shlockmeister," as I am affectionately known by my legions of admiring critics) on the other.

I mention this only because it sums up the essential weirdness of the Dark Tower experience for me. I have written enough novels and short stories to fill a solar system of the imagination, but Roland's story is my Jupiter—a planet that dwarfs all the others (at least from my own perspective), a place of strange atmosphere, crazy landscape, and savage gravitational pull. Dwarfs the others, did I say? I think there's more to it than that, actually. I am coming to understand that Roland's world (or worlds) actually *contains* all the others of my making; there is a place in Mid-World for Randall Flagg, Ralph Roberts, the wandering boys from *The Eyes of the Dragon*, even Father Callahan, the damned priest from *'Salem 's Lot*, who rode out of New England on a Grey-hound Bus and wound up dwelling on the border of a terrible Mid-World land called Thunderclap. This seems to be where they all finish up, and why not? Mid-World was here first, before all of them, dreaming under the blue gaze of Roland's bombardier eyes.

This book has been too long in coming—a good many readers who enjoy Roland's adventures have all but howled in frustration—and for that I apolo-gize. The reason is best summed up by Susannah's thought as she prepares to tell Blaine the first riddle of their contest: *It is hard to begin*. There's nothing in these pages that I agree with more.

I knew that *Wizard and Glass* meant doubling back to Roland's young days, and to his first love affair, and I was scared to death of that story. Sus-pense is relatively easy, at least for me; love is hard. Consequently I dallied, I temporized, I procrastinated, and the book remained unwritten.

I began at last, working in motel rooms on my Macintosh PowerBook, while driving cross-country from Colorado to Maine after finishing my work on the miniseries version of *The Shining*. It occurred to me as I drove north through the deserted miles of western Nebraska (where I also happened to be, driving back from Colorado, when I got the idea for a story called "Children of the Corn"), that if I didn't start soon, I would never write the book at all.

*But I no longer know the truth of romantic love*, I told myself. *I know about marriage, and mature love, but forty-eight has a way of forgetting the heat and passion of seventeen.*

*I will help you with that part*, came the reply. I didn't know who that voice belonged to on that day outside Thetford, Nebraska, but I do now, be-cause I have looked into his eyes across a whore's bed in a land that exists very clearly in my

imagination. Roland's love for Susan Delgado (and hers for him) is what was told to me by the boy who began this story. If it's right, thank him. If it's wrong, blame whatever got lost in the translation.

Also thank my friend Chuck Verrill, who edited the book and hung with me every step of the way. His encouragement and help were invaluable, as was the encouragement of Elaine Koster, who has published all of these cow-boy romances in paperback.

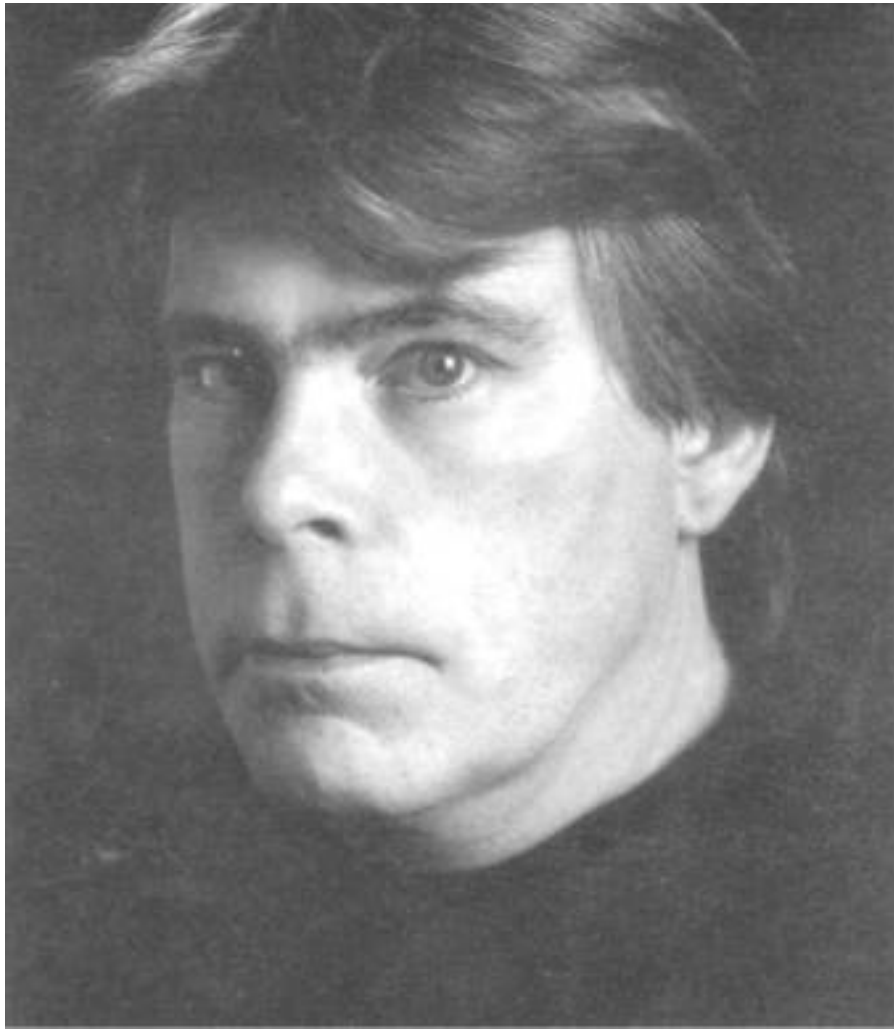
Most thanks of all go to my wife, who supports me in this madness as best she can and helped me on this book in a way she doesn't even know. Once, in a dark time, she gave me a funny little rubber figure that made me smile. It's Rocket J. Squirrel, wearing his blue aviator's hat and with his arms bravely outstretched. I put that figure on my manuscript as it grew (and grew ... and *grew*), hoping some of the love that came with it would kind of fertilize the work. It must have worked, at least to a degree; the book is here, after all. I don't know if it's good or bad—I lost all sense of perspective around page four hundred—but it's here. That alone seems like a miracle. And I have started to believe I might actually live to complete this cycle of stories. (Knock on wood.)

There are three more to be told, I think, two set chiefly in Mid-World and one almost entirely in our world—that's the one dealing with the vacant lot on the corner of Second and Forty-sixth, and the rose that grows there. That rose, I must tell you, is in terrible danger.

In the end; Roland's *ka-tet* will come to the nightscape which is Thunderclap . . . and to what lies beyond it. All may not live to reach the Tower, but I believe that those who do reach it will stand and be true.

—Stephen King  
*Lovell, Maine, October 27, 1996*





STEPHEN KING, the world's best selling novelist, is the author of more than thirty books, most recently *Desperation*, *Rose Madder*, *Insomnia*, and *The Green Mile*. His four volumes in the Dark Tower series, including *The Gunslinger*, *The Drawing of the Three*, and *The Waste Lands*, are all available in Plume trade paperback editions. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.

# WIZARD AND GLASS

At last, Stephen King returns to the Dark Tower with the eagerly anticipated fourth volume in his bestselling series. Roland, The Last Gunslinger, and his band of followers have narrowly escaped one world, and slipped into the next. It is here that Roland tells them a long-ago tale of love and adventure involving a beautiful and quixotic woman named Susan Delgado. With shocking plot twists and a driving narrative force, *Wizard and Glass* is the book readers have been waiting for.

*And the Tower is closer....*

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A PLUME BOOK



# Dark Tower V

*by Stephen King*

## Prologue: Calla Bryn Sturgis

### 1

Tian was blessed (although few farmers would use such a word) with three patches: River Field, where his family had grown rice since time out of mind; Roadside Field, where ka-Jaffords had grown sharproot, pumpkin, and corn for those same long years and generations; and Son of a Bitch, a thankless tract which mostly grew rocks and blisters and busted hopes. Tian wasn't the first Jaffords determined to make something of the twenty acres behind the home place; his gran-pere, perfectly sane in all other respects, had been convinced there was gold there. Tian's mother had been equally positive it would grow porin, a spice of great worth. Tian's insanity was madrigal. Of course madrigal would grow in Son of a Bitch. Must grow there. He had gotten hold of a thousand seeds (and a dear penny they had cost him) which were now hidden beneath the floorboards of his bedroom. All that remained before planting next year was to break ground in Son of a Bitch. This was a chore easier spoken of than accomplished.

Tian was blessed with livestock, including three mules, but a man would be mad to try using a mule out in Son of a Bitch; the beast unlucky enough to draw such duty would likely be lying legbroke or stung to death by noon of the first day. One of Tian's uncles had almost met this latter fate some years before. He had come running back to the home place, screaming at the top of his lungs and pursued by huge mutie wasps with stingers the size of nails.

They had found the nest (well, Andy had found it; Andy wasn't bothered by wasps no matter how big they were) and burned it with kerosene, but there might be others. Then there were the holes. You couldn't burn holes, could you? No. And Son of a Bitch sat on what the old folks called "loose ground." It was consequently possessed of almost as many holes as rocks, not to mention at least one cave that puffed out draughts of nasty, decay-smelling air. Who knew what boggarts might lurk down its dark throat?

As for the holes, the worst of them weren't out where a man (or a mule) could see them. Not at all, sir. Never think so, thankee-sai. The leg-breakers were always

concealed in innocent-seeming nestles of weeds and high grass. Your mule would step in, there would come a bitter crack like a snapping branch, and then the damned thing would be lying there on the ground, teeth bared, eyes rolling, braying its agony at the sky. Until you put it out of its misery, that was, and stock was valuable in Calla Bryn Sturgis, even stock that wasn't precisely threaded.

Tian therefore plowed with his sister in the traces. No reason not to. Tia was roont, hence good for little else. She was a big girl—the roont ones often grew to prodigious size—and she was willing, Man Jesus love her. The Old Fella had made her a Jesus-tree, what he called a crucifix, and she wore it everywhere. It swung back and forth now, thumping against her sweating skin as she pulled.

The plow was attached to her shoulders by a rawhide harness. Behind her, alternately guiding the plow by its old ironwood handles and his sister by the hame-traces, Tian grunted and yanked and pushed when the blade of the plow dropped down and verged on becoming stuck. It was the end of Full Earth but as hot as midsummer here in Son of a Bitch; Tia's overalls were dark and damp and stuck to her long and meaty thighs. Each time Tian tossed his head to get his hair out of his eyes, sweat flew out of the mop in a spray.

"Gee, ye bitch!" he cried. "Yon rock's a plow-breaker, are ye blind?"

Not blind; not deaf, either; just stupid. Roont. She heaved to the left, and hard. Behind her, Tian stumbled forward with a neck-snapping jerk and barked his shin on another rock, one he hadn't seen and the plow had, for a wonder, missed. As he felt the first warm trickles of blood running down to his ankle, he wondered (and not for the first time) what madness it was that always got the Jaffordses out here. In his deepest heart he had an idea that madrigal would sow no more than the porin had before it, although you could grow devil-grass; yep, he could have bloomed all twenty acres with that shit, had he wanted. The trick was to keep it out, and it was always New Earth's first chore. It—

The plow rocked to the right and then jerked forward, almost pulling his arms out of their sockets. "Arr!" he cried. "Go easy, girl! I can't grow em back if you pull em out, can I?"

Tia turned her broad, sweaty, empty face up to a sky full of low-hanging clouds and honked laughter. Man Jesus, but she even sounded like a donkey. Yet it was laughter, human laughter. Tian wondered, as he sometimes couldn't help doing, if that laughter meant anything. Did she understand some of what he was saying, or did she only respond to his tone of voice? Did any of the roont ones—

"Good day, sai," said a loud and almost completely toneless voice from behind

him. The owner of the voice ignored Tian's scream of surprise. "Pleasant days, and may they be long upon the earth. I am here from a goodish wander and at your service."

Tian whirled around, saw Andy standing there—all twelve feet of him—and was then almost jerked flat as his sister took another of her lurching steps forward. The plow's hame-traces were pulled from his hands and flew around his throat with an audible snap. Tia, unaware of this potential disaster, took another sturdy step forward. When she did, Tian's wind was cut off. He gave a whooping, gagging gasp and clawed at the straps. All of this Andy watched with his usual large and meaningless smile.

Tia jerked forward again and Tian was pulled off his feet. He landed on a rock that dug savagely into the cleft of his buttocks, but at least he could breathe again. For the moment, anyway. Damned unlucky field! Always had been! Always would be!

Tian snatched hold of the leather strap before it could pull tight around his throat again and yelled, "Hold, ye bitch! Whoa up if you don't want me to twist yer great and useless tits right off the front of yer!"

Tia halted agreeably enough and looked back to see what was what. Her smile broadened. She lifted one heavily muscled arm—it glowed with sweat—and pointed. "Andy!" she said. "Andy's come!"

"I ain't blind," Tian said and got to his feet, rubbing his bottom. Was that part of him also bleeding? He had an idea it was.

"Good day, sai," Andy said to her, and tapped his metal throat three times with his three metal fingers. "Long days and pleasant nights."

Although Tia had surely heard the standard response to this—And may you have twice the number—a thousand times or more, all she could do was once more raise her broad idiot's face to the sky and utter her donkey laugh. Tian felt a surprising moment of pain, not in his arms or throat or outraged ass but in his heart. He vaguely remembered her as a little girl: as pretty and quick as a dragonfly, as smart as ever you could wish. Then—

But before he could finish the thought, a premonition came. Except that was too fine a word for it. In fact, it was time. Overtime. Yet he felt a sinking in his heart. The news would come while I'm out here, too, he thought. Out in this godforsaken patch where nothing is well and all luck is bad.

"Andy," he said.

"Yes!" Andy said, smiling. "Andy, your friend! Back from a goodish wander and at your service. Would you like your horoscope, sai Tian? It is Full Earth. The moon is red, what is called the Huntress Moon in Mid-World that was. A friend will call! Business affairs prosper! You will have two ideas, one good and one bad—"

"The bad one was coming out here to turn this field," Tian said. "Never mind my goddam horoscope, Andy. Why are you here?"

Andy's smile probably could not become troubled—he was a robot, after all, the last one in Calla Bryn Sturgis or for miles and wheels around—but to Tian it seemed to grow troubled, just the same. The robot looked like a young child's stick-figure of an adult, impossibly tall and impossibly thin. His legs and arms were silvery. His head was a stainless steel barrel with electric eyes. His body, no more than a cylinder seven feet high, was gold. Stamped in the middle—what would have been a man's chest—was this legend:

NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS, LTD.  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH LaMERK INDUSTRIES  
PRESENTS

ANDY

Design: MESSENGER (Many Other Functions)  
Serial # DNF 34821 V 63

Why or how this silly thing had survived when all the rest of the robots were gone—gone for generations—Tian neither knew nor cared. You were apt to see him anywhere in the Calla (he would not venture beyond its borders) striding on his impossibly long silver legs, looking everywhere, occasionally clicking to himself as he stored (or perhaps purged—who knew?) information. He sang songs, passed on gossip and rumor from one end of town to the other—a tireless walker was Andy the robot—and seemed to enjoy the giving of horoscopes above all things, although there was general agreement in the village that they meant little.

He had one other function, however, and that meant much.

"Why are ye here, ye bag of bolts and beams? Answer me! Is it the Wolves? Are they coming from Thunderclap?"

Tian stood there looking up into Andy's stupid smiling metal face, the sweat growing cold on his skin, praying with all his might that the foolish thing would say no, then offer to tell his horoscope again, or perhaps to sing "The Green Corn

A-Dayo," all twenty or thirty verses.

But all Andy said, still smiling, was: "Yes, sai."

"Christ and the Man Jesus," Tian said (he'd gotten an idea from the Old Fella that those were two names for the same thing, but had never bothered pursuing the question). "How long?"

"One moon of days before they arrive," Andy replied, still smiling.

"From full to full?"

"Yes, sai."

Thirty days, then. Thirty days to the Wolves. And there was no sense hoping Andy was wrong. No one knew how the robot could know they were coming out of Thunderclap so far in advance of their arrival, but he did know. And he was never wrong.

"Fuck you for your bad news!" Tian cried, and was furious at the waver he heard in his own voice. "What use are you?"

"I'm sorry that the news is bad," Andy said. His guts clicked audibly, his eyes flashed a brighter blue, and he took a step backward. "Would you not like me to tell your horoscope? This is the end of Wide Earth, a time particularly propitious for finishing old business and meeting new people—"

"And fuck your false prophecy, too!!" Tian bent, picked up a clod of earth, and threw it at the robot. A pebble buried in the clod clanged off Andy's metal hide. Tia gasped, then began to cry. Andy backed off another step, his shadow trailing out spider-long in Son of a Bitch field. But his hateful, stupid smile remained.

"What about a song? I have learned an amusing one from the Manni far north of town; it is called 'In Time of Loss, Make God Your Boss.'" From somewhere deep in Andy's guts came the wavering honk of a pitch-pipe, followed by a ripple of piano keys. "It goes—"

Sweat rolling down his cheeks and sticking his itchy balls to his thighs. Tia blatting her stupid face at the sky. And this idiotic, bad-news-bearing robot getting ready to sing him some sort of Manni hymn.

"Be quiet, Andy." He spoke reasonably enough, but through clamped teeth.

"Sai," the robot agreed, then fell mercifully silent.

Tian went to his bawling sister, put his arm around her, smelled the large (but not entirely unpleasant) work-smell of her. He sighed, then began to stroke her trembling arm.

"Quit it, ye great bawling cunt," he said. The words might have been ugly but the tone was kind in the extreme, and it was tone she responded to. She began to quiet. Her brother stood with the flare of her hip pushing into him just below his ribcage (she was a full foot taller), and any passing stranger would likely have stopped to look at them, amazed by the similarity of face and the great dissimilarity of size. The resemblance, at least, was honestly come by: they were twins.

He soothed his sister with a mixture of endearments and profanities—in the years since she had come back roont from the west, the two modes of expression were much the same to Tian Jaffords—and at last she ceased her weeping. And when a rustie flew across the sky, doing loops and giving out the usual series of ugly blats, she pointed and laughed.

A feeling was rising in Tian, one so foreign to his nature that he didn't even recognize it. "Ain't right," he said. "Nossir. By the Man Jesus and all the gods that be, it ain't." He looked to the west, where the hills rolled away into a rising membranous darkness that might have been clouds but wasn't. It was the borderland between Mid-World and End-World. The edge of Thunderclap.

"Ain't right what they do to us."

"Sure you wouldn't like to hear your horoscope, sai? I see many bright coins and a beautiful dark lady."

"The dark ladies will have to do without me," Tian said, and began pulling the harness off his sister's broad shoulders. "I'm married, as I'm sure ye very well know."

"Many a married man has had his jilly," Andy observed. To Tian he sounded almost smug.

"Not those who love their wives." Tian shouldered the harness (he'd made it himself, there being a marked shortage of tack for human beings in most livery barns) and turned toward the home place. "And not farmers, in any case. Show me a farmer who can afford a jilly and I'll kiss your shiny ass. Go on, Tia."

"Home place?" she asked.

"That's right."



"Lunch at home place?" She looked at him in a muddled, hopeful way. "Taters?" A pause. "Gravy?"

"Shore," Tian said. "Why the hell not?"

Tia let out a whoop and began running toward the house. There was something almost awe-inspiring about her when she ran. As their father had once observed, not long before the brain-storm that carried him off, "Bright or dim, that's a lot of meat in motion."

Tian walked slowly after her, head down, watching for the holes which his sister seemed to avoid without even looking, as if some strange deep part of her had mapped the location of each one. That strange new feeling kept growing and growing. He knew about anger—any farmer who'd ever lost cows to the milk-sick or watched a summer hailstorm beat his corn flat knew plenty about anger—but this was deeper. This was rage, and it was a new thing. He walked slowly, head down, fists clenched. He wasn't aware of Andy following along behind him until the robot said, "There's other news, sai. Northwest of town, along the path of the Beam, strangers from Out-World—"

"Bugger the Beam, bugger the strangers, and bugger your good self," Tian said. "Let me be, Andy."

Andy stood where he was for a moment, surrounded by the rocks and weeds and useless knobs of Son of a Bitch, that thankless tract of Jaffrey land. Relays inside him clicked. His eyes flashed. And he decided to go and talk to the Old Fella. The Old Fella never told him to bugger his good self. The Old Fella was always willing to hear his horoscope.

And he was always interested in strangers.

Andy started toward town and Our Lady of Serenity.

## 2

Zalia Jaffords didn't see her husband and sister-in-law come back from Son of a Bitch; didn't hear Tia plunging her head repeatedly into the rain-barrel outside the barn and then blowing moisture off her lips like a horse. Zalia was on the south side of the house, hanging out wash and keeping an eye on the children. She wasn't aware that Tian was back until she saw him looking out the kitchen window at her. She was surprised to see him there at all and much more than surprised at the look of him. His face was ashy pale except for two bright blots of color high up on his cheeks and a third glaring in the center of his forehead like a brand.

She dropped the few pins she was still holding back into her clothes basket and started for the house.

"Where goin, Ma?" Heddon called, and "Where goin, Maw-Maw?" Hedda echoed.

"Never mind," she said. "Just keep a eye on your ka-babbies."

"Why-yyy?" Hedda whined. She had that whine down to a science. One of these days she would draw it out a little too long and her mother would clout her over the hills and far away.

"Because ye're the oldest," she said.

"But—"

"Shut your mouth, Hedda Jaffords."

"We'll watch em, Ma," Heddon said. Always agreeable was her Heddon; probably not quite so bright as his sister, but bright wasn't everything. Far from it. "Want us to finish hanging the wash?"

"Hed-donnnn..." From his sister. That irritating whine again. But she had no time for them. She just took one glance at the others: Lyman and Lia, who were five, and Aaron, who was two. Aaron sat naked in the dirt, happily chunking two stones together. He was the rare singleton, and how the women of the village envied her on account of him! Because Aaron would always be safe. The others, however, Heddon and Hedda...Lyman and Lia...

She suddenly understood what it might mean, him back at the house in the middle of the day like this. She prayed to the gods it wasn't so, but when she came into the kitchen and saw the way he was looking out at the kiddies, she feared it was.

"Tell me it isn't the Wolves," she said in a dry and frantic voice. "Say it's not."

"It is," Tian replied. "Thirty days, Andy says—moon to moon. And on that Andy's never—"

Before he could go on, Zalia Jaffords clapped her hands to her temples and voiced a shriek. In the side yard, Hedda jumped up. In another moment she would have been running for the house, but Heddon held her back.

"They won't take any as young as Lyman and Lia, will they?" she asked him. "Hedda or Heddon, maybe, but surely not the babbies? Not my little ones? Why, they won't see their sixth for another half-year!"

"The Wolves have taken em as young as three, and you know it," Tian said. His hands opened and closed, opened and closed. That feeling inside him continued to grow—the feeling that was deeper than mere anger.

She looked at him, tears spilling down her face.

"Mayhap it's time to say no." Tian spoke in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

"How can we?" she whispered. "Oh, T, how in the name of all the gods can we?"

"Dunno," he said. "But come here, woman, I beg you."

She came, throwing one last glance over her shoulder at the five children in the back yard—as if to make sure they were still all there, that no Wolves had taken them yet—and then crossed the living room. Gran-pere sat in his corner chair by the dead fire, head bent over, dozing and drizzling from his folded, toothless mouth.

From this room the barn was visible. Tian drew his wife to the window and pointed. "There," he said. "Do you mark em, woman? Do you see em very well?"

Of course she did. Tian's sister, six and a half feet tall, now standing with the straps of her overalls lowered and her big breasts sparkling with water as she splashed them from the rain-barrel. Standing in the barn doorway was Zalman, Zalia's very own brother. Almost seven feet tall he was, big as Lord Perth and as empty of face as the girl. A strapping young man watching a strapping young woman with her breasts out on show like that might well have been sporting a bulge in his pants, but there was none in Zally's. Nor ever would be. He was roont.

She turned back to T. They looked at each other, a man and woman not roont, but only because of dumb luck. So far as either of them knew, it could just as easily have been Zal and Tia standing in here and watching Tian and Zalia out by the barn, grown large of body and empty of head.

"Of course I see," she told him. "Does ye think I'm blind?"

"Don't it sometimes make you wish you was?" he asked. "To see em so?"

Zalia made no reply.

"Not right, woman. Not right. Never has been."

"But since time out of mind—"

"Bugger time out of mind, too!" Tian cried. "They's children! Our children!"

"Would you have the Wolves burn the Calla to the ground, then? Leave us all with our throats cut? That or worse? For it's happened in other places. You know it has."

He knew, all right. And who would put matters right, if not the men of Calla Bryn Sturgis? Certainly there were no authorities, not so much as a sheriff, either high or low, in these parts. They were on their own. Even long ago, when the Inner Baronies had glowed with light and culture, they would have seen precious little sign of that bright-life out here. These were the borderlands, and life here had always been strange. Then the Wolves had begun coming and life had grown far stranger. How long ago had it begun? How many generations? Tian didn't know, but he thought "time out of mind" was too long. The Wolves had been raiding into the borderland villages when Gran-pere was young, certainly—Gran-pere's own twin had been snatched as the two of them sat in the dust, playing at jacks. "Dey tuk eem cos he closah to de rud," Gran-pere had told them (many times). "Eef Ah come out of dee house firs' da' day, Ah be closah to de rud an dey take me, God is good!" Then he would kiss the wooden cross the Old Fella had given him, hold it skyward, and cackle.

Yet Gran-pere's own Gran-pere had told him that in his day—which would have been five or perhaps even six generations back, if Tian's calculations were right—that there had been no Wolves sweeping out of Thunderclap on their horrible gray horses. Once Tian had asked the old man, And did all but a few of the babbies come in twos back then? Did yer Old Fella ever say? Gran-pere had considered this long, then had shaken his head. No, he couldn't remember that his Gran-pere had ever said about that, one way or the other.

Zalia was looking at him anxiously. "Ye're in no mood to think of such things, I wot, after spending your morning in that rocky patch."

"My frame of mind won't change when they come or who they'll take," Tian said.

"Ye'll not do something foolish, T, will you? Something foolish and all on your own?"

"No," he said.

No hesitation. He's already begun to lay plans, she thought, and allowed herself a thin gleam of hope. Surely there was nothing Tian could do against the Wolves—nothing any of them could do—but he was far from stupid. In a farming village where most men could think no further than hoeing the next row or planting

their stiffies on Saturday night, Tian was something of an anomaly. He could write his name; he could write words which said I LOVE YOU ZALLIE (and had won her by so doing, even though she couldn't read them there in the dirt); he could add the numbers and also call them back from big to small, which he said was even more difficult. Was it possible...?

Part of her didn't want to complete that thought. And yet, when she turned her mother's heart and mind to Hedda and Heddon, Lia and Lyman, part of her wanted to hope. "What, then?"

"I'm going to call a meeting at the Town Gathering Hall," he said. "I'll send the feather. "

"Will they come?"

"When they hear this news, every man in the Calla will turn up. We'll talk it over. Mayhap they'll want to fight this time. Mayhap they'll want to fight for their babbies."

From behind them, a cracked old voice said, "Ye foolish killin."

Tian and Zalia turned, hand in hand, to look at the old man. Killin was a harsh word, but Tian judged the old man was looking at them—at him—kindly enough.

"Why d'ye say so, Gran-pere?" he asked.

"Men'd go forrad from such a meetin as ye plan on and burn down hat' countryside, were dey in drink," the old man said. "Men sober—" He shook his head. "Ye'll never move such."

"I think this time you might be wrong, Grand-pere," Tian said, and Zalia felt cold terror squeeze her heart. He believed it. He really did.

### 3

There would have been less grumbling if he'd given them at least one night's notice, but Tian wouldn't do that. One moon of days before they arrive, Andy had said, and that was all the horoscope Tian Jaffords needed. They didn't have the luxury of even a single fallow night. And when he sent Heddon and Hedda with the feather, they did come. He'd known they would. It had been over twenty years since the Wolves last came calling to Calla Bryn Sturgis, and times had been good. If they were allowed to reap this time, the crop would be a large one.

The Calla's Gathering Hall was an adobe at the end of the village high street,

beyond Took's General Store and cater-corner from the town pavillion, which was now dusty and dark with the end of summer. Soon enough the ladies of the town would begin decorating it for Reap, but they'd never made a lot of Reaping Night in the Calla. The children always enjoyed seeing the stuffy-guys thrown on the fire, of course, and the bolder fellows would steal their share of kisses as the night itself approached, but that was about it. Your fripperies and festivals might do for Mid-World and In-World, but this was neither. Out here they had more serious things to worry about than Reaping Day Fairs.

Things like the Wolves.

Some of the men—from the well-to-do farms to the east and the three ranches to the south—came on horses. Eisenhart of the Lazy B even brought his rifle and wore crisscrossed ammunition bandoliers. (Tian Jaffords doubted if the bullets were any good, or that the ancient rifle would fire even if some of them were.) A delegation of the Manni folk came crammed into a buckboard drawn by a pair of mutie geldings—one with three eyes, the other with a pylon of raw pink flesh poking out of its back. Most of the Calla's menfolk came on donkeys and burros, dressed in their white pants and long colorful shirts. They knocked their dusty sombreros back on the tugstrings with callused thumbs as they stepped into the Gathering Hall, looking uneasily at each other. The benches were of plain pine. With no womenfolk and none of the roont ones, the men filled less than thirty of the ninety benches. There was some talk, but no laughter at all.

Tian stood out front with the feather now in his hands, watching the sun as it sank toward the horizon, its gold steadily deepening to a color that was like infected blood. When it touched the hills, he took one more look up the high street. It was empty except for three or four roont fellas sitting on the steps of Took's. All of them huge and good for nothing more than yanking rocks out of the ground. He saw no more men, no more approaching donkeys. He took a deep breath, let it out, then drew in another and looked up at the deepening sky.

"Man Jesus, I don't believe in you," he said. "But if you're there, help me now. Tell God thankee."

Then he went inside and closed the Gathering Hall doors a little harder than was strictly necessary. The talk stopped. A hundred and forty men, most of them farmers, watched him walk to the front of the hall, the wide legs of his white pants swishing, his shor'-boots clacking on the hardwood floor. He had expected to be terrified by this point, perhaps even to find himself speechless. He was a farmer, not a stage performer or a politician. Then he thought of his children, and when he looked up at the men, he found he had no trouble meeting their eyes. The feather in

his hands did not tremble. When he spoke, his words followed each other easily, naturally, and coherently. They might not do as he hoped they would—Gran-pere might be right about that—but he saw they were willing enough to listen. And wasn't that the necessary first step?

"You all know who I am," he said as he stood there with his hands clasped around the reddish feather's ancient stalk. "Tian Jaffords, son of Alan Jaffords, husband of Zalia Hoonik that was. She and I have five, two pairs and a singleton."

Low murmurs at that, most probably having to do with how lucky Tian and Zalia were, how lucky with their Aaron. Tian waited for the voices to die away.

"I've lived in the Calla all my life. I've shared your khef and you have shared mine. Now hear what I say, I beg you."

"We say thankee-sai," they murmured. It was little more than a stock response, yet Tian was encouraged.

"The Wolves are coming," he said. "I have this news from Andy. Thirty days from moon to moon and then they're here."

More low murmurs. Tian heard dismay and outrage, but no surprise. When it came to spreading news, Andy was extremely efficient.

"Even those of us who can read and write a little have almost no paper to write on," Tian said, "so I cannot tell ye with any real certainty when last they came. There are no records, ye ken, just one mouth to another. I know I was well-breeched, so it's longer than twenty years—"

"It's twenty-four," said a voice in the back of the room.

"Nay, twenty-three," said a voice closer to the front, and Reuben Caverra stood up. He was a plump man with a round, cheerful face. The cheer was gone from it now, however, and it showed only distress. "They took Ruth, my sissy: hear me, I beg."

A murmur—really no more than a vocalized sigh of agreement—came from the men sitting crammed together on the benches. They could have spread out, but had chosen shoulder-to-shoulder instead. Sometimes there was comfort in discomfort, Tian reckoned.

Reuben said, "We were playing under the big pine in the front yard when they came. I made a mark on that tree each year after. Even after they brung her back, I went on with em. It's twenty-three marks and twenty-three years." With that he sat down.

"Twenty-three or twenty-four, makes no difference," Tian said. "Those who were babbies—or kiddies—when the Wolves came last time have grown up since and had kiddies of their own. There's a fine crop here for those bastards. A fine crop of children." He paused, giving them a chance to think of the next idea for themselves before speaking it aloud. "If we let it happen," he said at last. "If we let the Wolves take our children into Thunderclap and then send them back to us roont."

"What the hell else can we do?" cried a man sitting on one of the middle benches. "They's not human!" At this there was a general (and miserable) mumble of agreement.

One of the Manni stood up, pulling his dark blue cloak tight against his bony shoulders. He looked around at the others with baleful eyes. They weren't mad, those eyes, but to Tian they looked a long league from reasonable. "Hear me, I beg," he said.

"We say thankee-sai." Respectful but reserved. To see a Manni up close was a rare thing, and here were eight, all in a bunch. Tian was delighted they had come. If anything would underline the deadly seriousness of this business, the appearance of the Manni would do it.

The Gathering Hall door opened and one more man slipped inside. None of them, including Tian, noticed. They were watching the Manni.

"Hear what the Book says: When the Angel of Death passed over Aegypt, he killed the firstborn in every house where the blood of a sacrificial lamb hadn't been daubed on the doorposts. So says the Book."

"Praise the Book," said the rest of the Manni.

"Perhaps we should do likewise," the Manni spokesman went on. His voice was calm, but a pulse beat wildly in his forehead. "Perhaps we should turn these next thirty days into a festival of joy for the wee ones, and then put them to sleep, and let their blood out upon the earth. Let the Wolves take their corpses into the West, should they desire."

"You're insane," Benito Cash said, indignant and at the same time almost laughing. "You and all your kind. We ain't gonna kill our babbies!"

"Would the ones that come back not be better off dead?" the Manni responded. "Great useless hulks! Scooped-out shells!"

"Aye, and what about their brothers and sisters?" asked Vaughn Eisenhart. "For the Wolves only take one out of every two, as ye very well know."



A second Manni rose, this one with a silky-white beard flowing down over his breast. The first one sat down. The old man looked around at the others, then at Tian. "You hold the feather, young fella—may I speak?"

Tian nodded for him to go ahead. This wasn't a bad start at all. Let them fully explore the box they were in, explore it all the way to the corners. He was confident they'd see there were only two alternatives, in the end: let the Wolves take one of every pair under the age of puberty, as they always had, or stand and fight. But to see that, they needed to understand that all other ways out were dead ends.

The old man spoke patiently. Sorrowfully, even. "To take those who would have been left behind as well as those who'd come back to us spoiled forever...aye, it's a terrible thing to consider. But think'ee this, sais: if the Wolves were to come and find us childless, they might leave us alone ever after."

"Aye, so they might," one of the smallhold farmers rumbled—Tian believed his name was Jorge Estrada. "And so they might not. Manni-sai, would you really kill a whole town's children for what might be?"

A strong rumble of agreement ran through the crowd. Another smallholder, Garrett Strong, rose to his feet. His pug-dog's face was truculent. His thumbs were hung in his belt. "Better we all kill ourselves," he said. "Babbies and grown-ups alike."

The Manni didn't look outraged at this. Nor did any of the other blue-cloaks around him. "It's an option," the old man said. "We would speak of it if others would." He sat down.

"Not me," Garrett Strong said. "It'd be like cuttin off your damn head to save shaving, hear me I beg."

There was laughter and a few cries of Hear you very well. Garrett sat back down, looking a little less tense, and put his head together with Vaughn Eisenhart. One of the other ranchers, Diego Adams, was listening in, his black eyes intent.

Another smallholder rose—Bucky Javier. He had bright little blue eyes in a small head that seemed to slope back from his goatee'd chin. "What if we left for awhile?" he asked. "What if we took our children and went back east? All the way to the Big River, mayhap?"

There was a moment of considering silence at this bold idea. The Big River was almost all the way back to Mid-World...where, according to Andy, a great palace of green glass had lately appeared and even more lately disappeared again. Tian

was about to respond himself when Eben Took, the storekeeper's son, did it for him. Tian was relieved. He hoped to be silent as long as possible. When they were talked out, he'd tell them what was left.

"Are ye mad?" Eben asked. "Wolves'd come in, see us gone, and burn all to the ground—farms and ranches, crops and stores, root and branch. What would we come back to?"

"And what if they came after us?" Jorge Estrada chimed in. "Do'ee think we'd be hard to follow, for such as the Wolves? They'd burn us out as Took says, ride our backtrail, and take the kiddies anyway!"

Louder agreement. The stomp of shor'-boots on the plain pine floorboards. And a few cries of Hear him, hear him!

"Besides," Neil Faraday said, standing and holding his vast and filthy sombrero in front of him, "they never steal all our children." He spoke in a frightened let's-be-reasonable tone that set Tian's teeth on edge. It was this counsel he feared above all others. Its deadly-false call to reason.

One of the Manni, this one younger and beardless, uttered a sharp and contemptuous laugh. "Ah, one saved out of every two! And that make it all right, does it? God bless thee!" He might have said more, but White-Beard clamped a gnarled hand on the young man's arm. That worthy said no more, but he didn't lower his head submissively, either. His eyes were hot, his lips a thin white line.

"I don't mean it's right," Neil said. He had begun to spin his sombrero in a way that made Tian feel a little dizzy. "But we have to face the realities, don't we? Aye. And they don't take em all. Why my daughter, Georgina, she's just as apt and canny—"

"Yar, and yer son George is a great empty-headed galoot," Ben Slightman said. Slightman was Eisenhart's foreman, and he did not suffer fools lightly. "I seen him settin on the steps in front of Tooky's when I rode downstreet. Seen him very well. Him and some others equally empty-brained."

"But—"

"I know," Slightman said. "You have a daughter who's as apt as an ant and canny as the day is long. I give you every joy of her. I'm just pointin out, like, that if not for the Wolves, you'd mayhap have a son just as apt and canny. Nor would he eat a peck a day, winter and summer, to no good end for ye, not even a brace o' grandbabbies."

Cries of Hear him and Say thankee as Ben Slightman sat down.

"They always leave us enough to go on with, don't they?" asked a smallhold farmer whose place was just west of Tian's, near the edge of the Calla. His name was Louis Haycox, and he spoke in a musing, bitter tone of voice. Below his moustache, his lips curved in a smile that didn't have much humor in it. "We won't kill our children," he said, looking at the Manni. "All God's grace to ye, gentlemen, but I don't believe even you could do so, came it right down to the killin-floor. Or not all of ye. We can't pull up bag and baggage and go east—or in any other direction—because we leave our farms behind. They'd burn us out, all right, and come after the children just the same. They need em, gods know why.

"It always comes back to the same thing: we're farmers, most of us. Strong when our hands are in the soil, weak when they ain't. I got two kiddies of my own, four years old, and I love em both well. Should hate to lose either. But I'd give one to keep the other. And my farm." Murmurs of agreement met this. "What other choice do we have? I say this: it would be the world's worst mistake to anger the Wolves. Unless, of course, we can stand against them. If t'were possible, I'd stand. But I just don't see how it is."

Tian felt his heart shrivel with each of Haycox's words. How much of his thunder had the man stolen? Gods and the Man Jesus!

Wayne Overholser got to his feet. He was Calla Bryn Sturgis's most successful farmer, and had a vast sloping belly to prove it. "Hear me, I beg."

"We say thankee-sai," they murmured.

"Tell you what we're going to do," he said, looking around. "What we always done, that's what. Do any of you want to talk about standing against the Wolves? Are any of you that mad? With what? Spears and rocks and a few bows? Maybe four rusty old soft-calibers like that?" He jerked a thumb toward Eisenhart's rifle.

"Don't be making fun of my shooting-iron, son," Eisenhart said, but he was smiling ruefully.

"They'll come and they'll take the children," Overholser said, looking around. "Some of the children. Then they'll leave us alone again for a generation or even longer. So it is, so it has been, and I say leave it alone."

Disapproving rumbles rose at this, but Overholser waited them out.

"Twenty-three years or twenty-four, it don't matter," he said when they were quiet again. "Either way it's a long time. A long time of peace. Could be you've

forgotten a few things, folks. One is that children are like any other crop. God always sends more. I know that sounds hard. But it's how we've lived and how we have to go on."

Tian didn't wait for any of the stock responses. If they went any further down this road, any chance he might have to turn them would be lost. He raised the opopanax feather and said, "Hear what I say! Would ye hear, I beg!"

"Thankee-sai," they responded. Overholser was looking at Tian distrustfully.

And you're right to look at me so, the farmer thought. For I've had enough of such soft and cowardly common sense, so I have.

"Wayne Overholser is a smart man and a successful man," Tian said, "and I hate to speak against his position for those reasons. And for another, as well: he's old enough to be my Da'."

"Ware he ain't your Da'," Garrett Strong's only farmhand—Rossiter, his name was—called out, and there was general laughter. Even Overholser smiled at this jest.

"Son, if ye truly hate to speak agin me, don't ye do it," he said. He continued to smile, but only with his mouth.

"I must, though," Tian said. He began to walk slowly back and forth in front of the benches. In his hands, the rusty-red plume of the opopanax feather swayed. Tian raised his voice slightly so they'd understand he was no longer speaking just to Overholser.

"I must because sai Overholser is old enough to be my Da'. His children are grown, ye ken, and so far as I know there were only two to begin with, one girl and one boy." He paused, then shot the killer. "Born two years apart." Both singletons, in other words. Both safe from the Wolves. The crowd murmured.

Overholser flushed a bright and dangerous red. "That's a rotten goddamned thing to say! My get has nothing to do with this whether single or double! Give me that feather, Jaffords. I got a few things to say."

But the boots began to thump down on the boards, slowly at first, then picking up speed until they rattled like hail. Overholser looked around angrily, now so red he was nearly purple.

"I'd speak!" he shouted. "Would'ee not hear me, I beg?"

Cries of No, no and Not now and Jaffords has the feather and Sit and listen came in

response. Tian had an idea sai Overholser was learning—and remarkably late in the game—that there was often a deep-running resentment of a village's richest and most successful. Those less fortunate or less canny might tug their hats off when the rich folk passed in their buckboards or lowcoaches, they might send thank-you delegations when the rich folk loaned their hired hands to help with a house- or barn-raising, the well-to-do might be cheered at Year End Gathering for helping to buy the piano that now sat in the pavillion's musica. Yet the men of the Calla tromped their shor'-boots to drown Overholser out with a certain savage satisfaction. Even those who undoubtedly supported what he'd said (Neil Faraday, for one) were tromping hard enough to break a sweat.

Overholser, unused to being balked in such a way—flabbergasted, in fact—tried one more time. "I'd have the feather, do ye, I beg!"

"No," Tian said. "In your time, but not now."

There were actual cheers at this, mostly from the smallest of the smallhold farmers and some of their hands. The Manni did not join in. They were now drawn so tightly together that they looked like a dark blue inkstain in the middle of the hall. They were clearly bewildered by this turn. Vaughn Eisenhart and Diego Adams, meanwhile, moved to flank Overholser and speak low to him.

You've got a chance, Tian thought. Better make the most of it.

He raised the feather and they quieted.

"Everyone will have a chance to speak," he said. "As for me, I say this: we can't go on this way, simply bowing our necks and standing quiet when the Wolves come and take our children. They—"

"They always return them," a hand named Farren Posella said timidly.

"They return husks!" Tian cried, and there were a few cries of Hear him. Not enough, however, Tian judged. Not enough by far. Not yet. The bulk of his work was yet to do.

He lowered his voice again—he did not want to harangue them. Overholser had tried that and gotten nowhere, a thousand acres or not.

"They return husks. And what of us? What is this doing to us? Some might say nothing, that the Wolves have always been a part of our life in Calla Bryn Sturgis, like the occasional cyclone or earthquake. Yet that is not true. They've been coming for six generations, at most. But the Calla's been here a thousand years and more."

The old Manni with the bony shoulders and baleful eyes half-rose. "He says true, folken. There were farmers here—and Manni-folk among em—when the darkness in Thunderclap hadn't yet come, let alone the Wolves."

They received this with looks of wonder. Their awe seemed to satisfy the old man, who nodded and sat back down.

"So the Wolves are almost a new thing," Tian said. "Six times have they come over mayhap a hundred and twenty or a hundred and forty years. Who can say? For as ye ken, time has softened, somehow."

A low rumble. A few nods.

"In any case, once a generation," Tian went on. He was aware that a hostile contingent was coalescing around Overholser, Eisenhart, and Adams. These men he would not move even if he were gifted with the tongue of an angel. Well, he could do without them, maybe. If he caught the rest. "Once a generation they come, and how many children do they take? Twelve? Eighteen? Maybe as many as thirty?"

"Sai Overholser may not have babbies this time, but I do—not one set of twins but two. Heddon and Hedda, Lyman and Lia. I love all four, but in a month of days, two of them will be taken away. And when those two come back, they'll be roont. Whatever spark there is that makes a complete human being, it'll be out forever."

Hear him, hear him swept through the room like a sigh.

"How many of you have twins with no hair except that which grows on their heads?" Tian demanded. "Raise yer hands!"

Six men raised their hands. Then eight. A dozen. Every time Tian began to think they were done, another reluctant hand went up. In the end, he counted twenty-two hands. He could see that Overholser was dismayed by such a large count. Diego Adams had his hand raised, and Tian was pleased to see he'd moved away a little bit from Overholser and Eisenhart. Three of the Manni had their hands up. Jorge Estrada. Louis Haycox. Many others he knew, which was not surprising, really; he knew these men. Probably all of them except for a few wandering fellows working smallhold farms for short wages and hot dinners.

"Each time they come and take our children, they take a little more of of our hearts and our souls," Tian said.

"Oh come on, now, son," Eisenhart said. "That's laying it on a bit th—"

"Shut up, Rancher," a voice said. It was shocking in its anger and contempt. "He's got the feather. Let him speak out to the end."

Eisenhart whirled around, as if to mark who had spoken to him so. Only bland faces looked back.

"Thankee sai," Tian said evenly. "I've almost come to the end. I keep thinking of trees. Strong trees. You can strip the leaves of a strong tree and it will live. Cut its bark with many names and it will live to grow its skin over them again. You can even take from the heartwood and it will live. But if you take of the heartwood again and again and again, year after year, there will come a time when even the strongest tree must die. I've seen it happen on my farm, and it's an ugly thing. They die from the inside out. You can see it in the leaves as they turn yellow from the trunk to the tips of the branches. And that's what the Wolves are doing to this little village of ours. What they're doing to our Calla."

"Hear him!" cried Freddy Rosario from the next farm over. "Hear him very well!" Freddy had twins of his own, although they were still on the tit and so probably safe.

"You say that if we stand and fight, they'll kill us all and burn the Calla from west-border to east."

"Yes," Overholser said. "So I do say. Nor am I the only one." And from all around him came rumbles of agreement.

"Yet each time we simply stand by with our heads lowered and our hands open while the Wolves take what's dearer to us than any crop or house or barn, they scoop a little more of the heart's wood from the tree that is this village!" Tian spoke strongly, now standing still with the feather raised high in one hand. "If we don't stand and fight soon, we'll be dead, anyway! This is what I say, Tian Jaffords, son of Alan! If we don't stand and fight soon, we'll be roont ourselves!"

Loud cries of Hear him! Exuberant stomping of shor'-boots. Even some applause.

George Telford, another rancher, whispered briefly to Eisenhart and Overholser. They listened, then nodded. Telford rose. He was silver-haired, tanned, and handsome in the weatherbeaten way women seemed to like.

"Had your say, son?" he asked kindly, as one might ask a child if he had played enough for one afternoon and was ready for his nap.

"Yar, reckon," Tian said. He suddenly felt dispirited. Telford wasn't a rancher on a scale with Vaughn Eisenhart, but he had a silver tongue. Tian had an idea he was

going to lose this, after all.

"May I have the feather, then?"

Tian thought of holding onto it, but what good would it do? He'd said his best. He had an idea it wouldn't be good enough—not once Telford got finished shredding his arguments with that smooth voice of his—but he'd tried. Perhaps he and Zalia should pack up the kids and go out east themselves. Moon to moon before the Wolves came, according to Andy. A person could get a hell of a head start on trouble in thirty days.

He passed the feather.

"We all appreciate young sai Jaffords's passion, and certainly no one doubts his courage," George Telford was saying. He spoke with the feather held against the left side of his chest, over his heart. His eyes roved the audience, seeming to make eye contact—friendly eye contact—with each man. "But we have to think of the kiddies who would be left as well as those who would be taken, don't we? In fact, we have to protect all the kiddies, whether they be twins, triplets, or singletons like sai Jaffords's Aaron."

Telford turned to Tian now.

"What will you tell your children as the Wolves shoot their mother and mayhap set their gran-pere on fire with one of their light-sticks? What can you say to make the sound of those shrieks all right? To sweeten the smell of burning skin and burning crops? That it's souls we're a-saving? Or the heart's wood of some make-believe tree?"

He paused, giving Tian a chance to reply, but Tian had no reply to make. He'd almost had them...but he'd left Telford out of his reckoning. Smooth-voiced sonofabitch Telford, who was also far past the age when he needed to be concerned about the Wolves calling into his dooryard on their great gray horses.

Telford nodded, as if Tian's silence was no more than he expected, and turned back to the benches. "When the Wolves come," he said, "they'll come with fire-hurling weapons—the light-sticks, ye ken--and guns, and flying metal things. I misremember the name of those—"

"The drones," someone called.

"The sneetches," called someone else.

"Stealthies!" called a third.



Telford was nodding and smiling gently. A teacher with good pupils. "Whatever they are, they fly through the air, seeking their targets, and when they lock on, they put forth whirling blades as sharp as razors. They can strip a man from top to toe in five seconds, leaving nothing around him but a circle of blood and hair. So my own gran-pere told me, and I have no reason not to believe it."

"Hear him, hear him well!" the men on the benches shouted. Their eyes had grown huge and frightened.

"The Wolves themselves are terrible fearsome, so 'tis said," Telford went on, moving smoothly from one campfire story to the next. "They look sommat' like men, and yet they are not men but something bigger and far more awful. And those they serve in far Thunderclap are more terrible by far. Vampires, I've heard. Broken-helm undead ronin. Warriors of the Scarlet Eye."

The men muttered. Even Tian felt a cold scamper of rat's paws up his back at the mention of the Eye.

"So I've been told," Telford went on, "and while I don't believe it all, I believe much. Never mind Thunderclap, though. Let's stick to the Wolves. The Wolves are our problem, and problem enough. Especially when they come armed to the teeth!" He shook his head, smiling grimly. "What would we do? Perhaps we could knock them from their greathorses with hoes, sai Jaffords? D'ee think?"

Derisive laughter greeted this.

"We have no weapons that can stand against them," Telford said. He was now dry and businesslike, a man stating the bottom line. "Even if we had such, we're farmers and ranchers and stockmen, not fighters. We—"

"Stop that talk, Telford. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Shocked gasps greeted this chilly pronouncement. There were cracking backs and necks as men turned to see who had spoken. Slowly, then, as if to give them exactly what they wanted, a white-haired figure in a long black coat and a turned-around collar rose slowly from the bench at the very back of the room. The scar on his forehead—it was in the shape of a cross—was very bright in the light of the kerosene lamps. It was the fellow who had slipped in unnoticed while the Manni elder was going on about Aegypt and sacrificial lambs and the Angel of Death.

It was the Old Fella.

Telford recovered himself with relative speed, but when he spoke, Tian thought he

still looked shocked. "Beg pardon, Pere Callahan, but I have the feather—"

"To hell with your heathen feather and to hell with your cowardly counsel," Pere Callahan said. He stepped into the aisle and began to hobble down the center aisle, stepping with the grim gait of arthritis. He wasn't as old as the Manni elder, nor nearly so old as Tian's gran-pere (who claimed he was the oldest person not only here but in Calla Lockwood to the south), and yet he seemed somehow older than both. Older than the ages. Some of this no doubt had to do with the haunted eyes that looked out at the world from below the scar on his forehead (according to Zalia, it had been self-inflicted). More had to do with the sound of him. Although he had been here long and long—enough years to build his strange Man Jesus church and convert half the Calla to his way of spiritual thinking—not even a stranger would have been fooled into believing Pere Callahan was from here. His alienness was in his flat and nasal speech and in the often obscure slang he used ('street-jive,' he called it). He had undoubtedly come from one of those other worlds the Manni were always babbling about, although he never spoke of it and Calla Bryn Sturgis was now his home. He had been here since long before Tian Jaffords was born—since town elders like Wayne Overholser and Vaughn Eisenhart had worn short pants—and no one disputed his right to speak, with or without the feather.

Younger than Tian's gran-pere he might be, but Pere Callahan was still the Old Fella.

## 4

Now he surveyed the men of Call Bryn Sturgis, not even glancing at George Telford. The feather sagged in Telford's hand. He sat down on the first bench, still holding it.

Callahan began with one of his slang-terms, but they were farmers and no one needed to ask for an explanation.

"This is chickenshit."

He surveyed them longer. Most would not return his look. After a moment, even Eisenhart and Adams dropped their eyes. Overholser kept his head up, but under the Old Fella's dry and bitter gaze, the rancher looked petulant rather than defiant.

"Chickenshit," the man in the black coat and turned-around collar repeated. A small gold cross gleamed below the notch in the backwards collar. On his forehead, that other cross—the one he'd supposedly carved in his flesh with his

own thumbnail in partial penance for some awful sin—glared under the lamps like a tattoo.

"This young man isn't one of my flock, but he's right, and I think you all know it. You know it in your hearts. Even you, Mr. Overholser. And you, George Telford."

"Know no such thing," Telford said, but his voice was weak and stripped of its former persuasive charm.

"All your lies will cross your eyes, that's what my mother would have told you." Callahan offered Telford a thin smile Tian wouldn't have wanted it pointed in his direction. And then Callahan did turn to him. "I never heard it put better than you put it tonight, boy. Thankee-sai."

Tian raised a feeble hand and managed an even more feeble smile. He felt like a character in a silly festival play, saved at the last moment by some improbable supernatural intervention.

"I know a bit about cowardice," Callahan said, turning to the men on the benches. "I have personal experience, you might say. I know how one cowardly decision leads to another...and another...and another...until it's too late to turn around, too late to change. Mr. Telford, I assure you the tree of which young Mr. Jaffords spoke is not make-believe. The Calla is in dire danger. Your souls are in danger."

"Hail Mary, full of grace," said someone on the left side of the room, "the Lord is with thee. Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, J—"

"Bag it," Callahan snapped. "Save it for Sunday." His eyes, blue sparks in their deep hollows, studied them. "For this night, never mind God and Mary and the Man Jesus. Never mind the sneetches and light-sticks of the Wolves, either. You must fight. You're the men of the Calla, are you not? Then act like men. Stop behaving like dogs crawling on their bellies to lick the boots of a cruel master."

Overholser went dark red at that, and began to stand. Diego Adams grabbed his arm and spoke in his ear. For a moment Overholser remained as he was, frozen in a kind of crouch, and then he sat back down. Adams stood up.

"Sounds good, padrone," Adams said in his heavy accent. "Sounds brave. Yet there are still a few questions, mayhap. Haycox asked one of em. How can ranchers and farmers stand against armed killers out of the west?"

"By hiring armed killers of our own," Callahan replied.

There was a moment of utter, amazed silence. It was almost as if the Old Fella had

lapsed into another language. At last Diego Adams said—cautiously, "I don't understand."

"Of course you don't," the Old Fella said. "So listen and gain wisdom. Rancher Adams and all of you, listen and gain wisdom. Not six days' ride northeast of us, and bound southwest along the Path of the Beam, come three gunslingers and one 'prentice." He smiled at their amazement—their utter and complete amazement. Then he turned to Tian. "The 'prentice isn't much older than your Heddon and Hedda, but he's already as quick as a snake and as deadly as a scorpion. The others are quicker and deadlier by far. You want hard calibers? They're at hand. I set my watch and warrant on it."

This time Overholser made it all the way to his feet. His face burned as if with a fever. His great pod of a belly trembled. "What children's goodnight story is this?" he asked. "If there ever were such men, they passed out of existence with Gilead. And Gilead has been dust in the wind for a thousand years."

There were no mutterings of support or dispute. No mutterings of any kind. The crowd was still frozen, caught in the reverberation of that one mythic word: gunslingers.

"You're wrong," Callahan said, "but we don't need to fight over it. We can go and see for ourselves. A small party will do, I think. Jaffords here...myself...and what about you, Overholser? Want to come?"

"There ain't no gunslingers!" Overholser roared.

Behind him, Jorge Estrada stood up. "Pere Callahan, God's grace on you—"

"—and you, Jorge."

"—but even if there were gunslingers, how could three stand against forty or sixty? And not forty or sixty normal men, but forty or sixty Wolves?"

"Hear him, he speaks sense!" Eben Took, the storekeeper's son, called out.

"And why would they fight for us?" Estrada continued. "We make it from year to year, but not much more. What could we offer them, beyond a few hot meals? And what man agrees to die for his dinner?"

"Hear him, hear him!" Telford, Overholser, and Eisenhart cried in unison. Others stamped rhythmically up and down on the boards.

The Old Fella waited until the stomping had quit, and then said: "I have books in the Rectory. Half a dozen."

Although most of them knew this, the thought of books—all that paper—still provoked a general sigh of wonder.

"According to one of them, gunslingers were forbidden to take reward. Supposedly because they descend from the line of Arthur Eld."

"The Eld! The Eld!" the Manni whispered, and several raised fists into the air with the first and fourth fingers raised. Hook em horns, the Old Fella thought. Go, Texas. He managed to stifle a laugh, but not the smile that rose on his lips.

"Are ye speaking of hardcases who wander the land, doing good deeds?" Telford asked in a gently mocking voice. "Surely you're too old for such tales, Pere."

"Not hardcases," Callahan said patiently, "gunslingers."

"How do you know, Pere?" Tian heard himself ask. "And how can three men stand against the Wolves?"

One of the gunslingers was actually a woman, but Callahan saw no need to muddy the waters further (although an impish part of him wanted to, just the same). "I know because I know," he said. "As for how three may stand against many—three and an apprentice, actually—that's a question for their dinh. We'll ask him. And they wouldn't be fighting just for their dinners, you know. Not at all."

"What else, then?" Bucky Javier asked.

Callahan knew they were there because he had seen them. He had seen them because the thing under the church floor had awakened. They would want the thing under the floor, and that was good because the Old Fella, who had once run from a town called Jerusalem's Lot in another world, wanted to be rid of it. If he wasn't rid of it soon, it would kill him.

Ka had come to Calla Bryn Sturgis. Ka like a wind.

"In time, Mr. Javier," Callahan said. "All in good time, sai."

Meantime, a whisper had begun in the Gathering Hall. It slipped along the benches like from mouth to mouth, a breeze of hope and fear.

Gunslingers.

Gunslingers to the east, come out of Mid-World.

And it was true, God help them. Arthur Eld's last deadly children, moving toward Calla Bryn Sturgis along the Path of the Beam. Ka like a wind.

"Time to be men," Pere Callahan told them. Beneath the scar on his forehead, his eyes burned like lamps. Yet his tone was not without compassion. "Time to stand up, gentlemen. Time to stand and be true."