

Dark Tower V

Prologue: Calla Bryn Sturgis

by Stephen King

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-Day," 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 kened 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 blating 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 Lymon 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 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."